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# Thinking about Grammar in the Middle School: A Study and Recommendations

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THINKING ABOUT GRAMMAR IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL:  
A STUDY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A Thesis Presented

by

JENNIFER AULT SIMMONS

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies and Research  
of the University of Massachusetts at Boston in partial  
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Critical and Creative Thinking Program




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A STUDY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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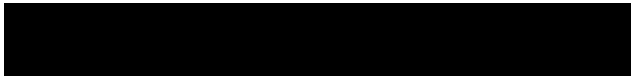
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I wish to acknowledge each person who has helped me along the way by promising that I will do the same for another. In particular, I would like to thank Dr. Delores Gallo for modeling the art and science of extraordinary teaching.

## ABSTRACT

### THINKING ABOUT GRAMMAR IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL: A STUDY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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The study involved 53 sixth graders in a small, rural town in southeastern Massachusetts. Its purpose was to identify some of the grammatical concepts held by these students. The survey is presented. Briefly, these students lack understanding of basic grammatical concepts (such as the subject/verb relationship and subject versus object). These and other misconceptions indicate that students do not understand the role of word function in language. A central finding about students' attitudes toward grammar study is that students do not realize that they have intuitive knowledge of their native language. Although students are not sure what grammar is, most of them believe that grammar should be studied in the middle school.

This thesis suggests that teachers strive to identify students' misconceptions about language and devise ways to bring about changes in understanding. New learning ideally should be interactive as opposed to additive. A learner must relate a new idea to what is already known. A series of five lessons on language structure and a series of four lessons on contemporary usage are recommended. All lessons reflect a critical and creative thinking approach to learning.

In this thesis, grammar is defined as meaning sentence structure but including usage. Grammar has always been a traditional part of the English language arts curriculum despite the fact that the study of grammar in isolation has been rejected by the National Council of Teachers of English. This thesis agrees with that view. The current literature on the teaching of grammar is reviewed. Grammar studies generally recommend integrating grammar into writing and reading , a whole language approach.

Literature on early adolescent learner readiness is also reviewed. Three main issues are identified as being crucial to the well-being of early adolescents and their success in school: social-emotional development, biological development (i.e. brain growth), and cognitive development.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION AND DEFINITIONS

### Introduction

My goal as a seventh grade English language arts teacher is to help my students use language effectively: to articulate their own ideas and feelings and to communicate those ideas and feelings clearly and accurately with others. The question for me as their teacher is how best to accomplish this.

Traditionally, grammar has been seen as a method of acquiring literacy. I, along with many others, have reservations about this view. In my years in the classroom, I have not seen much direct correlation between knowledge of grammar and fluency with language. Of course the question is what do we mean by "knowledge of grammar." This thesis addresses that question in some depth. Grammar is a sizable part of my curriculum. In fact, I have worked in several different systems within the last eight years, and the study of grammar was a part of each system's English language arts curriculum. In my own district, instruction in the parts of speech begins in the first grade. There are two main issues explored in this thesis: what do we mean by grammar and how, if at all, does the study of grammar best fit into the middle school English language arts curriculum?

### Critical and Creative Thinking

Before I think about grammar in the middle school, I must think about thinking and how to facilitate student growth in it through language study. This section briefly discusses critical thinking, creative thinking, and



metacognition. Rather than a general review of the critical and creative thinking literature, this section focuses on those aspects most relevant to this thesis.

### What is Critical Thinking?

As in all fields, there are differences in expert opinion. In the field of critical thinking, Barry Beyer, sees critical thinking as the teaching of discrete skills, while Robert Sternberg defines critical thinking as addressing problems including ill-defined problems (Gallo, 1992). Two major experts in the field of critical thinking, Richard Paul and Robert Ennis, however are in substantial agreement on major issues about critical thinking. Both Paul and Ennis cite the contribution of affective and cognitive abilities to effective performance. Both of their definitions are action-oriented. Even parts of their lists of abilities and subskills are similar.

Richard Paul is the director of the Center for Critical Thinking at Sonoma State University. Gerald Nosich is the assistant director. Both are members of the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking Instruction. Paul uses the Council's definition of critical thinking:

Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. (Paul and Nosich 1991, 4)

In order to develop thinking of this kind, Paul argues, dialogical thinking is essential (Paul 1987, 129). Dialogical thinking is thinking done from at least two points of view. Without this ability, Paul would argue, our instinctual, egocentric biases will prevent reasoned, rational thought (Paul

1987, 130). Paul sees dialogical thinking as providing practice and skill in critical thinking, which in the

strong sense is teaching it [critical thinking] so that students explicate, understand, and critique their own deepest prejudices, biases, and misconceptions. . . My key assumption is that only if we come experientially to contest our inevitable egocentric and sociocentric habits of thought can we hope to think in a genuinely rational fashion. (Paul 1987, 140)

Paul states that if children's ideas are not brought out, their prior conceptions, or misconceptions, will block those concepts that teachers are trying to introduce. Both conception and misconception will exist separately unless the student integrates them or replaces one of them. If some kind of conceptual change does not happen, the child will continue to call upon the instinctual concepts and access the newer ones only in a school setting and at the insistence of the teacher. These ideas are supported by those by Strike and Posner (1985). Basically, Strike and Posner view learning as involving interaction between old and new ideas. These ideas are discussed further in Chapter III within the section on cognitive development. Howard Gardner urges the same approach in his latest book The Unschooled Mind.

Paul's thoughts on instinctive concepts held by all of us, and consequently, the importance of the affective in teaching and learning is interesting to me. I love his phrase "rational passion" because it would seem to some, I imagine, an oxymoron (Paul 1987, 142). "Only the development of rational passions can prevent our intelligence from becoming the tool of our egocentric emotions and the point of view embedded in them" (Paul 1987, 142).

The point of dialogical thinking is not "to discover that everything is relative and arbitrary or a matter of opinion, but that all beliefs and points of view are subject to rational analysis and assessment" (Paul 1987, 145). The ability to assume contrasting points of view draws upon creative as well as critical thinking. It is as misleading to separate completely critical and creative thinking as it is to separate cognitive from affective aspects of learning. According to Richard Paul, one's thinking is an integrated system made up of four aspects of reasoning. The list is partial, but sufficient, I believe to convey the direction of Paul's thinking.

- 1) Elements of Reasoning, such as probing point of view, concepts, the issue or problem, and assumptions;
- 2) Reasoning Abilities, like evaluating evidence, clarifying values and standards, questioning deeply, and synthesizing subject matter knowledge;
- 3) Traits of the Reasoning Mind, for example, independent thinking, intellectual empathy, curiosity, and perseverance;
- 4) Standards for Reasoning, such as be clear, relevant, precise, logical, and complete. (Paul 1987, 145)

Paul is concerned mainly with strategies for developing critical thinking. But, I continue to turn to Robert Ennis for a basic yet workable, kind of mainstream definition of critical thinking. Ennis writes, "critical thinking is reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (Ennis 1987, 10). One reason this definition appeals to me is its orientation to belief and action. It is also succinct, thus more easily mastered by students. The two other words in this definition that strike me as particularly well chosen are "reasonable" and "reflective," in their recognition of the role of both cognitive and affective aspects of thinking.

Critical thinking, Ennis states, is not synonymous with higher order thinking skills; however, skills considered to be higher order are part of



critical thinking. A difference between critical thinking and the vague term "higher order thinking skills" is that critical thinking includes dispositions, the affective component of thinking. Ennis lists fourteen dispositions, some of which are as follows: being open-minded, being well informed, taking into account the total situation, being willing to take and maybe change a position, withholding judgment, and being sensitive to others (Ennis 1987). Among the cognitive abilities he lists are focusing on a question, analyzing arguments, induction, deduction, identifying assumptions, defining terms, and questioning (Ennis 1987).

Another element of Ennis' definition is creative thinking, even though it is not stated explicitly. "Formulating hypotheses, alternative ways of viewing a problem, questions, possible solutions, and plans for investigating something are creative acts that come under this definition" [of critical thinking] (Ennis 1987, 10). These behaviors are usually categorized by educators as demonstrations of creative thinking (Gallo 1990).

Ennis and Paul share many similarities in their definitions of critical thinking; items listed as either aspects of reasoning (Paul) or cognitive strategies (Ennis), and their inclusion of dispositions and creative thinking within their critical thinking definitions. I wish they had elaborated more on the interdependence of critical and creative thinking.

### The Relationship of Critical and Creative Thinking.

This interdependence of critical and creative is worth stating explicitly.

The common polarizing differentiation made between critical thinking and creative thinking is deceptive, since it often leads one to see creative thinking as the discrete opposite of rational thought. It minimizes the contribution

of necessary evaluative, convergent, critical processes to effective creative production, and similarly obscures the import of the speculative, divergent, imaginative processes to effective critical thought. While reasoning and imagination do differ, the difference appears not to be accounted for by the operation of discrete functions, but rather by the contribution of the same operations, both both divergent and convergent, in differing proportions and in different positions in the sequence of intellectual events that constitute addressing the task. (Gallo 1990, 103)

I agree with this conception of the interdependence of critical and creative thinking. It is the foundation of my practice.

### What is Creative Thinking?

Like Ennis' definition of critical thinking, David Perkins, Co-Director of Harvard Project Zero at Harvard University, also focuses on taking action. Perkins writes, "Creative thinking is thinking patterned in a way that tends to lead to creative results" (Perkins 1985, 58). Whereas critical thinking is characterized by convergent thinking, creative thinking is characterized by divergent thinking. I cannot explain this more eloquently than Delores Gallo, Co-Founder of the Critical and Creative Thinking Program at the University of MA at Boston, who writes,

Divergent processes emphasize highly flexible intellectual functioning, capable of rapid, often drastic changes in problem representation. Less direct than convergent thinking, divergent thinking describes a process of ranging flexibly in the search of relevant factors in connection with a specific task. It is marked by the generation of question, alternatives, hypotheses, and problem statements; it leads to the production of large numbers of varied responses and to the construction of original ideas and logical possibilities. It requires a context of high

error-tolerance for optimal functioning. (Gallo 1990, 101-102).

Creativity has something of a mystique surrounding it. Who is creative? Is creativity limited to a few gifted individuals? Is it inborn? Naturally, some people have more talent, ability, and helpful dispositions than others. Each of us is creative to some degree, at least potentially. "... it also is absolutely true that virtually everyone's personal creativeness can be increased beyond its present level" (Davis 1986, 202). In a book chapter entitled "Developing Creativeness" (pp. 205-206), Gary Davis lists seven approaches to creative development:

Acquiring a creativity consciousness; understanding the topic of creativity; becoming involved in creative activities; strengthening the creative process; strengthening creative personality traits; learning creativity techniques and principles of problem solving; strengthening creative abilities. (Davis 1986, 207).

There is a specific linguistic and creative thinking technique that is at the core of much creativity, and that is the use of metaphor. "Most creative ideas are in some way born in metaphorical thought. With metaphorical thinking one makes a connection between the present problem and a related situation" (Davis 1986, 139). It is this new idea combination that is creative. Metaphor enhances the power and scope of language. An ability to see possible connections brings us closer to people and ideas, hence metaphors are often used as a problem solving technique.

David Perkins proposes six general principles of creative thinking.

1. Creative thinking involves aesthetic as much as practical standards. [Creative people strive for creative results.]
2. Creative thinking depends on attention to purpose as much as to results.
3. Creative thinking depends on mobility more



than fluency. [Analogy and metaphor are used to shift a view of the problem]

4. Creative thinking depends on working at the edge more than at the center of one's competence.
5. Creative thinking depends as much on being objective as on being subjective.
6. Creative thinking depends on intrinsic, more than extrinsic motivation. (Perkins 1985, 58-59)

"The creative pattern of thinking is an interesting mix of strategies, skills, and attitudinal factors" (Perkins 1985, 60). Perkins' statement is similar to those made about critical thinking by Ennis and Paul. What Perkins calls "attitudinal factors", Paul refers to as "traits of the reasoning mind," and Ennis labels "dispositions" (Ennis 1987, 12). These similarities reinforce the interdependence of critical and creative thinking and the importance of the affective in learning. But, the success of attendant strategies depends upon content area knowledge. By infusing critical and creative thinking skills into the subject areas, teachers are building a foundation of competencies in that area and in specific thinking skills, both critical and creative, so that each aspect adds to and benefits from the other.

### Metacognition.

Metacognition is the most important element of thinking, in my opinion. Arthur Costa describes this process.

Being conscious of our own thinking and problem solving while thinking is known as metacognition. It is a uniquely human ability occurring in the neo-cortex of the brain. Good problem solvers plan a course of action before they begin a task, monitor themselves while executing that plan, back up or adjust the plan consciously, and evaluate themselves upon completion. (Costa 1985, 21).

Costa identifies strategies by which one can increase one's metacognitive competence.

Metacognitive instruction would include learning how to learn; how to study for a test; how to use strategies of question asking before, during, and after reading. It might include knowing how to learn best -- visually, auditorily, kinesthetically -- and what strategies to use when you find yourself in a situation that does not match your best learning modality. (Costa 1985, 22).

The study of metacognition has evolved from considering how it fits into the larger picture of cognition, to studying specific aspects of it. A new book, Metacognition: Core Readings, contains chapters such as Metacognitive Monitoring; Metacognitive Control; Developmental Aspects of Metacognition; Neuropsychological Aspects of Metacognition (Nelson 1992). The field of study interests different groups of people: cognitive psychologists, developmental psychologists, philosophers, and teachers.

As a teacher, my interest in metacognition is practical rather than scientific, theoretical, or philosophical. Metacognition is an important component in the development of thinking and skills, which in turn fosters more independent learning. Therefore, I want to help my students develop their metacognitive abilities. Aspects of metacognition specific to language learning and development will be discussed in Chapter III.

#### Creating a Context for Thinking.

First, I create an environment that encourages "teaching for thinking" (Costa 1985, 20). Problems and questions are seen as welcome challenges, not headaches. I not only pose questions, but I try to train students to pose questions to themselves and to others. A wrong answer or question is

viewed as a step toward a better answer or question. In this way, I am "teaching of thinking" (Costa 1985, 21). We discuss and evaluate thinking strategies, both critical and creative.

I have never used a separate thinking skills program. Instead, I use opportunities and contexts that arise naturally. These opportunities are almost always school-based, so I look for connections beyond the classroom. The object is to facilitate the transfer of thinking skills from the classroom to life in general. In order to do this, I am "teaching about thinking" (Costa 1985, 22). Metacognitive ability gives power and independence to each of us. My goal is to see students' attitudes evolve from "I just don't get it," to "What else can I try that will help me understand better?" I model thinking behaviors and skills to help my students see their effectiveness.

My beliefs about the importance of critical and creative thinking and metacognition provide a framework for all aspects of my learning and teaching. Having said all of this, I invite you to join me in thinking about grammar in the middle school.

### Two Conflicts

Stated most simply, my problem is reconciling what I believe my students should be doing in my class with my prescribed curriculum and what they will be expected to do later. I feel obligated to cover my curriculum, yet it sometimes interferes with and even conflicts with my own goals as a seventh grade English language arts teacher, as mentioned above. The issue of grammar itself and the age group involved are two conflicts.



### Age Level.

Seventh grade is the middle of the middle school. That is important to this thesis. How is this middle piece different? Where and how does it fit in? The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) is the professional organization to which most English language arts teachers look for guidance. Yet, even the NCTE is unclear about where middle school education belongs. For example, when one joins the NCTE, one is offered either the English Journal or Language Arts.

LANGUAGE ARTS is the professional journal for elementary teachers and teacher trainers. It provides. . . primarily as they relate to children in kindergarten through eighth grade. ENGLISH JOURNAL is a journal of ideas for English teachers in junior and senior high schools and middle schools. (NCTE 1991, 64)

I did not know which journal to choose. Middle School usually encompasses grades 5-8 or 6-8. I do not think either journal does an adequate job of meeting the needs of middle school English language arts teachers.

I believe the middle school learner has to be considered a constituency separate from both elementary and secondary constituencies. What are the characteristics of this age group? In terms of cognitive abilities and development, in what ways do students at this level learn? And most importantly, what does all of this mean in terms of curriculum? Chapter III of this thesis will examine characteristics of the seventh grade student and try to relate them to the second part of the problem, which is grammar instruction in the seventh grade.

## Grammar.

For many teachers, a contradiction exists in the very teaching of grammar. Many middle school teachers admit that teaching grammar is frustrating because so many children just do not learn it. Yet, those same teachers still teach it. Little research on grammar is being done at present. Most of the articles that are being written simply restate the same old arguments -- there is no transfer to writing and to general language use and grammar is too abstract for children to comprehend. So, why are so many teachers still teaching it? Some may be required to teach grammar. Others may teach it because they feel it is necessary for kids to know grammar. What about the fact that so many children do not learn grammar in spite of all this teaching? What about all the research questioning the value of teaching grammar?

Bransford and Vye propose three areas of research necessary for a valid theory of instruction that I think also apply to the study of grammar: 1) understanding of expert performance; 2) research on the initial states of learners; and 3) assumptions about the nature of transition between the two states (Bransford and Vye 1989). Since grammar is a part of my curriculum, I need to find an effective, efficient rationale for and way to teach those concepts and skills. Chapter IV of this thesis will attempt to learn what grammatical concepts seventh graders possess. With that as a starting point, perhaps something can be inferred about the needed areas of research just mentioned. First, relevant terms such as "grammar" and "usage" must be defined.



As soon as one talks of grammar in any depth, the term "usage" appears. Because they have been, and often still are, used interchangeably, the difference between the two terms -- and I believe there is a difference -- can be difficult to discern.

Behind usage as a subject lies a collection of opinions about what English grammar is or should be, about the propriety of using certain words and phrases, and about the social status of those who use certain words and constructions. . . . In fact they are often regarded as rules of grammar, even if they concern only matters of social status or vocabulary selection. (Webster's Dictionary of English Usage 1989, 7a)

### Grammar Viewed Historically

The first English grammar book, Bref Grammar for English, was written by William Bullokar and published in 1586. He was concerned with "regularizing and reforming" (Webster's Dictionary 1989, 7a) language and the book's intent was most likely as an introduction to the study of Latin grammar. The study of English grammar originated in the need to prepare a student to study Latin. The first English grammars were "simplified Latin grammars with English illustrations." Later when the study of Latin became less important to one's education, schools continued to use grammar books "on the theory that they taught 'superior' English, that is, English that resembled Latin" (Evans and Evans 1957, Preface). What no one seemed to consider is that grammatical concepts and terms that apply to one language will not necessarily apply to a different language. Latin is an inflected language, that is, word endings are structurally important. English is an uninflected, syntactic language, meaning it is based on word order.

In the 17th century, grammars were written for either foreigners who wanted to learn the language or for school use in preparation for the subsequent study of Latin. In the 18th century, as education spread to the rapidly growing bourgeoisie or middle class, grammars were primarily written for native speakers. In addition to instructing, an important function was correcting language use. Usage in the 20th century continues the tradition of linguistic etiquette.

### Grammar and Usage

Even scholars confuse grammar and usage, or at least to my understanding they confuse the two. This is from the Preface to A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage.

Doubts about what is respectable English and what is not usually involve questions of grammar. There are some grammatical constructions, such as *that there dog* and *he ain't come yet*, that are perfectly intelligible but are not standard English. . . . Since language changes this much, no one can say how a word *ought* to be used. The best that anyone can do is to say how it is being used, and this is what a grammar should tell us. It should give us information on what is currently accepted as good English. (Evans and Evans 1957, Preface v - vi)

I disagree. Rules of usage, not laws of grammatical structure, provide information about good versus bad or, as I prefer, appropriate versus inappropriate language use. "He ain't come yet," is a grammatical sentence. It is not standard English certainly, but standard English is simply one form of the language. Across the country there is a great variety of slang, colloquial speech, and regional dialects. This sentence is clearly intelligible, structurally

sound, and undoubtedly appropriate within a different form or dialect of the English language. I do not see this as a question of grammar but of usage. Let's look more closely at the words "grammar" and "usage," taking "grammar" first.

Two questions need to be considered. "What is grammar?" and "What is a grammar?" One question, the former, implies a wider realm. Before a student attempts to comprehend specific grammatical concepts, perhaps he/she should develop an understanding of the concept of grammar itself. The grammar of a thing is its structure. James Moffett offers this about the concept of structure, "The value of the concept lies in its emphasis on relations rather than things" (Moffett 1968, 1). Language is not the only symbol system that has a structure. Besides language, grammar exists in music, art, and mathematics, among other symbol systems.

### What is Grammar?

*Grammar is the structure of the elements that comprise a thing.* In terms of language, the elements are words, the relationships between them, and the arrangement of those words. English teachers use the word "syntax" as generally meaning "word order." In music, notes, timbre, rhythm, and dynamics are the elements. The grammar of a piece of music lies in the arranging and combining of those elements. Similarly, the elements which compose a painting: color, texture, space, line, and shapes, are its grammar. In fact, definition 8a for the word grammar in The World Book Dictionary reads, ". . . the elements of any subject: *the grammar of painting*" (World Book Dictionary 1990, 925). My last example is from mathematics. Chapter 7

of The Language of Mathematics is about algebra. Dr. Frank Land, the author, begins that chapter discussing language.

Language consists of words used in accordance with a generally accepted convention which is codified into a grammar. . . . A language that is unambiguous and simple is a prerequisite of systematic thought. The requirements are words and a grammar. (Land 1963, 86)

He continues, shifting the emphasis away from words to other symbols.

When describing very general laws it is of great advantage to be able to express them in abstract symbols which evoke no mental pictures. . . . The more abstract the formulation and expression of a law, the wider its application; the more concrete the expression, the more restricted will be the field of usefulness. (Land 1963, 87)

Finally, he draws algebra directly into the picture. The variables, which of course can stand for anything, are the elements.

. . . a statement such as  
'If  $x < y$  and  $y < z$  then  $x < z$ ' applies to [everything]. . . . It is because of its abstract form that algebra is so . . . useful . . . Algebra may, therefore, be thought of as the most succinct form of language. As a form of language, it consists of grammatical sentences, implying that it must, at least, have nouns, verbs and a codified convention governing the expression of these items in sentences of unambiguous construction. . . . It is essential to formulate every statement in algebra as a complete and grammatical sentence. The word 'grammar' [is in quotes] because the grammar of algebra is a modification of the grammar of English and its rules are the rules of algebra. (Land, 1963, 87)



The point of the previous discussion is that grammar is a concept that exists outside of its traditional realm of composition or grammar lessons. In addition, this concept can be found in other aspects of the language arts curriculum.

The word "grammar" also appears in research on reading comprehension. This is another connection that may help students widen their understanding of the term. Story grammar is story syntax, or the presence and ordering, of categories (e.g., setting, conflict, response, and so on) instead of words (Beck 1989). Elements, or categories, of a story must appear in a certain order or the story will not make sense, just as words have to be in a certain order for a sentence to make sense. Another reading-writing transfer is syntax. Readers also often rely on their knowledge of syntax to construct meaning (Beck 1989). Bette Bude teaches grammar and comprehension by omitting certain function words which forces students to rely on word order and semantics (word meaning) to make sense of the text. This is known as the cloze method (Bude 1985). The point is that grammar and syntax have relevance in language study beyond the parts of speech. Beyond that point, the concept of grammar could make a wonderful interdisciplinary project that would establish grammar as more than just rules of language.

### What is a Grammar?

I stated earlier that there were two questions about the word "grammar": "What is grammar?" and "What is a grammar?" The first question has been addressed. The second question seems narrower and more specific because of the use of the article "a." What is a grammar? That might

depend upon whom you asked. There are several groups of people in particular who might be interested in this question: English teachers, their captive students, linguists, and psycholinguists, among others.

A linguist, of course, is one who specializes in linguistics. Linguistics is "the science of language . . . the study of the structure, development, etc. of a particular language . . ." (Webster's New World Dictionary 1970, 823).

Psycholinguistics is yet another branch "that deals with the mental states and processes in language and speech" (World Book Dictionary 1990, 1680).

### Types of Grammar.

Each type of linguist may very well have a certain type or kind of grammar in mind, and there are all kinds: traditional, structural, transformational-generative, case, discourse, and more! For example, teachers, and students in turn, usually work with traditional grammar which involves the parts of speech, usage (which we will focus on shortly), and parsing sentences. This is what Rei Noguchi refers to as "old-fashioned grammar - that is, the parts of speech and the structure and functions of various syntactic constructions (e.g., phrases, clauses, and sentences), with accompanying advice on usage" (Noguchi 1991, 1).

Psycholinguists often work with transformational grammar, "a primary aim [of which] is to account for native speakers' intuitions about their language" (Weaver 1979, 122). Constance Weaver lists five different contexts when defining grammar: 1) grammar as syntax; 2) grammar as usage; 3) grammar as a description of the syntactic structure of a language (in a linguistic sense); 4) grammar as a description of the mental processes of language (in a psycholinguistic sense); and 5) grammar as a text for teaching

one of the above or any combination (Weaver 1979). *A grammar is a specific description of a structure.*

### Other Definitions.

Tate Hudson's definition of grammar combines Weaver's first four definitions. "The English profession defines grammar as the 'laws' governing the function of words to produce understandable messages, incorporating usage, semantics, and syntax" (Hudson 1981, 6). Regardless of what type of grammar with which you are working, grammar is an abstract set of rules describing what we do with the elements of language to make meaningful, though not necessarily correct, utterances

Instead of focusing on a specific grammar or pieces of different grammatical systems, I suggest that classroom teachers broaden the term and work with the concept of grammar, which means structure but includes usage. This means that teachers must separate grammar from usage because structure (or form) and usage are not synonymous.

### Usage.

Separating grammar (sentence structure) and usage is exactly what James Stalker recommends. He cautions against confusing the two terms. Grammar is a description of the structure of language or a theory of language. "Grammar is what Chomsky and other theoreticians do . . ." (Stalker 1980, 2). Usage, on the other hand, is choosing a certain form of the language.

The issue of usage is an emotional one. When teachers are forced by the public and administrators to teach a unit on grammar, Stalker advocates using that as an opportunity to point out the differences between grammar

and usage. This is an example of a metalinguistic activity. Metalinguistics is an awareness of language and an ability to reflect upon it. In this sense also, grammar becomes a metacognitive tool in that it is used as a means to another end. In this case, grammar becomes a strategy or technique of learning social and political lessons. "We should be certain that they understand that grammar study helps them bring to consciousness knowledge of the unconscious grammatical rule system they already possess" (Stalker 1980, 10). Usage should be taught as a "sociolinguistic phenomenon." In other words, grammar can be a tool for socio-cultural advancement. Teachers are obligated, in Stalker's opinion, to help students to realize the political realities of using a "nonprestige" dialect in terms of social and economic class.

This is a touchy issue. Nonstandard English has its own usage rules. It is an issue of difference, not correctness. But, it is also an issue of appropriateness. Fair or not, biased or unbiased, standard English is the acceptable dialect in professional and public circles. Therefore, all nonstandard speakers must be given the opportunity to learn standard English. This does not mean all other dialects should be outlawed, however. Teachers should encourage linguistic pride in every speech community, while also encouraging nonstandard speakers to acquire standard English as a second dialect. Also, teachers should educate standard English speakers about the richness and legitimacy of other English dialects.

Another teacher promoting the grammar/usage dichotomy is Jean Sanborn who teaches usage, not grammar. Like Stalker, she would present usage in terms of "personal power" (Sanborn 1986, 74) that can increase one's economic and social options in the adult world. This is her definition of grammar. ". . . (I)t is the system of rules governing the formation of words



and the abstract relationships among words which generates the syntax of a language" (Sanborn 1986, 74).

Sanborn's example, delineating the difference between grammar and usage is the word group, "Him and me went wading in the brook" (Sanborn, 1986, 74). Since this sentence is likely to be used by some native speakers and comprehended by most, it is a question of usage, not grammar. Usage involves word choice. Despite the word choices, the message is not obscured because the syntax (or structure) remains consistent. "Him and me went wading in the brook" is a grammatical utterance whether or not a certain group considers it "incorrect." The question of correctness lies not in the word order, but in the selection of the objective pronouns "him and me" as subjects. This is a usage issue.

"Waded he and I the brook in" is ungrammatical because of its syntax (Sanborn 1986, 74). This is a grammar issue. Sanborn notes the folly of simply replacing traditional grammar with some other grammatical system. The teacher and students would still be faced with a set of exercises to practice and lots of terminology to learn. More of Sanborn's article will be discussed in the next chapter.

Robert Small's definition of grammar makes them one and the same. ". . . grammar in the true sense of the word -- that is, the study of syntax -- has never been a part of the English curriculum" (Small 1985, 177). Grammar is the structure of some thing, language in this case, and structure in the English language is based on word order, which is syntax. Therefore, grammar is syntax, according to Small. His article, like Stalker's and this thesis, looks back in history to remind teachers that the tradition of studying English grammar is a misapplied idea inherited from the study of Latin centuries ago.

### A Style of Inquiry.

The premise on which this thesis is constructed is that usage and grammar are not one and the same, yet both are important. I think Mina Shaughnessy has an interesting idea, ". . . grammar is more a way of thinking, a style of inquiry, than a way of being right" (Shaughnessy 1977, 129). "Grammar should be a matter not of memorizing rules or definitions but of thinking through problems as they arise" (Shaughnessy 1977, 137). "A style of inquiry" (129); I like that. It is an approach that goes beyond what is usually presented in classrooms and suggests a new, fresh way of working with that aspect of the curriculum which is most traditional.

### Thesis Definitions

The purpose of this section is to offer the definition of terms as they will be used throughout this thesis. What is grammar? Grammar is the structure of a thing. In language, grammar is sentence structure. That structure depends on the arrangement of the elements that comprise that thing, be they words, notes, colors, or variables. What is a grammar? A grammar is one specific way of describing the structure and/or theory of a thing. How are the two different? The former is a general concept. The latter is a specific kind or type of description of that thing. To help clarify the issues further, this thesis will use the word "structure" when referring to syntax. I prefer the term "structure" because it is transferrable to other symbol systems (music, mathematics, art), whereas syntax is usually limited to language. The word "usage" will refer to matters of specific language choice and situational appropriateness. The general term "grammar" as it is most commonly used in education will refer to sentence structure, but it will also include usage.

Although structure and usage are not the same, both are included under the general educational term "grammar" because both of them are part of the English language arts curriculum.

What are the differences between structure and usage? Usage is something that is likely to change much more rapidly than structure. Specific words and/or conventions of language constantly change. Those are matters of usage. While the structure (or syntax) of our language changes (For example, the English of Shakespeare's time is different from contemporary English.), it does so much more slowly. Usage involves constant decision-making. There is much less decision space in matters of structure. In prose, the direct object has to follow the verb. I think of structure in terms of the forest and usage in terms of individual trees.

### Summary

The impetus for this thesis is the conflict between my goals as a seventh grade English language arts teacher and my prescribed curriculum which requires that I teach grammar, meaning structure and including usage, to seventh graders. I note a lack of consistency within the profession about the status of the middle school student and suggest that students in the middle school are a separate constituency and should be so treated. Several questions are implied. Should seventh graders study grammar, and if so, how much grammar, which parts of grammar (just usage or structure, too?), and using which critical and creative thinking strategies?

English grammar is viewed historically going back to its function as preparation for the study of Latin. Then, the term "grammar" is contrasted with the term "usage," a difference many find difficult to keep straight.

Grammar is viewed in two ways: What is grammar? and What is a grammar? The former is structure, which can also apply to other disciplines as well. Music, art, and algebra are cited as examples of the versatility of this term. The latter is a specific description of a structure. Which type of a grammar used would depend on the person and his/her purpose.

Several definitions of grammar and usage are examined before being redefined for the purpose of this thesis. Grammar is distinguished from usage and defined as simply the structure of something. The next chapter is a review of the current literature on grammar instruction. Chapter III examines the traits of the seventh grade learner and calls for more scholarship concentrating on English language arts and the 10 - 14 year old. In Chapter IV, I present and discuss the results of data I collected about grammatical concepts held by in-coming seventh graders. The last chapter, Chapter V, offers my thoughts and recommendations about grammar in the middle school curriculum.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE GRAMMAR LITERATURE

#### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present a review of the recent literature on the teaching and learning of grammar. Because there is so little research that focuses on grammar instruction and learning in the middle school, let alone in just grade seven, the review includes research about the teaching and learning of grammar at other educational levels as well. But first, a distinction needs to be made between articles discussing issues and practices and research conducted.

More teachers and researchers are reviewing older scholarship than are conducting their own research. Reviewing seems to mean that they summarize the studies and results of others without adding much to the discussion. Few studies currently are being done on facets of grammar study, especially at the middle school level. By studies I mean actual research and experiments to gather data, test hypotheses, and/or replicate earlier studies to match results. In my search of the literature I found only one (Hudson 1981) that was fairly recent.

There are some, but not many, articles being written about grammar as it is studied in school. Based on articles I have read, and teachers at all levels with whom I have spoken, I have identified what seems to me a four point consensus regarding the teaching of grammar. 1) The study of grammar does not improve writing, and in fact, does not transfer anywhere. 2) Isolated grammar exercises are a waste of everyone's time. 3) Grammar is too difficult for children to learn because of its abstract nature. 4) Any grammar that must

be taught (usually meaning usage) should be taught in relation to a student's own writing.

The impression I have received is that these beliefs are so well established that no further evidence is needed to support them. If that is the case, then why is so much grammar still being taught in so many middle school classrooms (Donovan 1990)? With the exception of Jean Sanborn, whose views are discussed later in the chapter, I have not come across any teacher/researcher willing to say that zero grammar should be presented. Virtually every source I located agrees that some concepts and/or rules need to be taught at some point, even while disagreeing about when, what, and how much to present.

#### National Council of Teachers of English

The position long held by the NCTE is reiterated periodically. The following is quoted from the National Council of Teachers of English Forum. The heading reads "On Grammar Exercises to Teach Speaking and Writing."

Background: This resolution was prompted by the continuing use of repetitive grammar drills and exercises in the teaching of English in many schools. Proposers pointed out that ample evidence from 50 years of research has shown the teaching of grammar in isolation does not lead to improvement in students' speaking and writing, and that in fact, it hinders development of students' oral and written language.

Resolved, that the National Council of Teachers of English affirm the position that the use of isolated grammar and usage exercises not supported by theory and research is a deterrent to the improvement of students' speaking and writing and that, in order to improve both of these,

class time at all levels must be devoted to opportunities for meaningful listening, speaking, reading, and writing; and that NCTE urge the discontinuance of testing practices that encourage the teaching of grammar rather than English language arts instruction. (NCTE 1985, 2-3)

### Grammar in the Middle School: Two Studies

#### Hudson.

In my search of the literature, I found two fairly recent studies of grammar and the middle school student. One was done by Tate Hudson in 1981. Hudson wondered why “some children succeed at certain intellectual tasks while others of equal or near equal IQ, age, and motivation are unable to master the same task” (Hudson 1981, 4). The subjects were 282 eighth graders from a small city (population approximately 20,000) in a rural county in the midwest.

For his study, he measured the level of cognitive development of eighth graders at the beginning of the year and again at midyear. Hudson used An Inventory of Piaget’s Developmental Tasks developed by the Center for Research in Thinking and Language, Department of Psychology, Catholic University. Students were assigned a Piagetian stage (concrete, transitional, formal) based on the results. Hudson shares his results in the original 1981 study and again in a 1987 English Journal article.

35% were thinking at Piaget’s concrete stage, similar to the kind of thinking typical of late elementary school, 50% were found to be able to think at a level typical of middle school age students [i.e., a transitional stage], and only 14% were thinking at the abstract or formal stage of cognitive development. . . . Of the children found in the concrete stage of thinking, 85% failed to identify correctly



simple subjects and verb phrases in nine sentences taken from the pretest in the grammar text. Of the students in the transitional stage, 74% of middle grade students failed to achieve a score of 60%. Of the students thinking at the formal operational level, 47% failed the test. (Hudson 1987, 83)

Hudson believes that the results "suggest that the abstract quality of grammatical rules makes them too difficult for eighth grade students" (Hudson 1981, 1) and that children are limited in what they can learn by their level of cognitive development. By examining standardized test scores to correlate with the results of the grammar test, he found "students with 130+ IQ's at all three levels of cognitive development. A high IQ did not guarantee success on the grammar task" (Hudson 1987, 83).

In this case, the task was identifying simple subjects and verb phrases in sentences taken from a textbook. The seven teachers who comprised the English department staff rated sixteen sentences for difficulty. However, the actual study used only nine of those sentences. Hudson analyzed the task of identifying subjects and verb phrases by breaking down the steps involved in this task to determine the difficulty of the grammatical task. I wondered if the students would have more success correctly identifying the subjects and verbs in sentences they generated, which is a question I asked in my own research and will discuss in Chapter Four.

In a 1987 English Journal article Hudson reviews his 1981 findings and concludes that "direct instruction in formal grammar is not suited to the middle grades . . ." (Hudson 1987, 82). He asserts that forcing a topic on an unready student costs that student in self-esteem, and also fosters a negative, defeatist attitude toward the topic itself, and perhaps even toward the class in which it was presented. At the end of the 1987 article, Hudson recommends



engaging students in lots of prewriting and writing activities. Students should learn revising and proofreading skills. Any grammar skills can be dealt with within a student's writing. Helpful methods include giving examples of better ways to express ideas, stimulating thinking about other ways to communicate an idea through questions, practicing sentence combining, and if the problem is too abstract, simply correcting the error.

Donovan.

The other article I found specifically on grammar in the middle school is by Jeanne Donovan from Lindenwood College in St. Charles, Missouri. In 1989 she surveyed fifty-five middle school language arts teachers in three local public school districts. Forty teachers responded to written questions devised and distributed by Donovan. She wanted to know how many were spending time on grammar instruction. The article in the English Journal included a sample of some of the questions asked by Donovan.

1. Do you think students need to master grammatical terminology?
  2. How much time in your language-arts classes is spent teaching grammar and usage?
  3. How do you teach grammar?
  4. Why do you teach grammar?
  5. How satisfied are you with student learning?
- (Donovan 1990, 62)

Seventy per cent of the teachers who responded believe it is important for their students to master grammatical terminology. Eighty percent indicated improved writing as a reason for teaching grammar. Yet, 45% said they were dissatisfied with student learning of grammar and usage.

This is a fine example of the paradox alluded to in the introduction to this chapter. Despite research going back to the early 1900's questioning the

value of grammar instruction, teachers still believe in the value of teaching it and many do so with a textbook, according to Donovan's study. Donovan surprised herself, and me also, by discovering that it was the sixth grade teachers (76% of them, in fact) who spent the most time (50%) on grammar and usage. I would have predicted that sixth grade teachers would spend the least amount of time on grammar and eighth grade teachers would spend the most amount of time, with seventh grade teachers somewhere in the middle. It has always been my impression that eighth grade teachers are most concerned with preparing their students for the next level, since so many high schools continue to track students.

Unfortunately, Donovan's article does not give enough information about the survey. Only a few questions from the survey are included and no information is given on the rest of the questions asked. We know nothing about the teachers in those districts: how many are veteran teachers? how many are newer teachers? under what kinds of certifications do these teachers teach? English? then what levels? or are they under a general elementary, middle school, or secondary certification? Also, Donovan never explains in her article how grammar and usage are defined. She does question if teachers believe that sixth grade is the "developmentally appropriate time to stress grammatical concepts" and wonder if standardized tests, curriculum, and/or textbooks are behind it all (Donovan 1990, 63).

Donovan is not convinced, though, that grammar is beyond student capabilities. She wonders why it is that students who can concentrate for hours on Nintendo strategies cannot work with the complexities of language. What if the worksheets and textbooks were replaced by inquiry-based activities? Just as so many teachers have set up reading and writing workshops based on Nancie Atwell's book In the Middle, Donovan asks if the



same approach could not be used for language study? Donovan proposes developing language activities that take into account four learning principles: discovery, ambiguity, metacognition, and cooperative learning. She states, "I believe that grammar deserves a place in the middle school curriculum, not only as an incidental part of the writing workshop and individual conference but also as a subject interesting in its own right" (Donovan 1990, 63-64).

Although I wish Donovan took the time to discuss what grammar she would teach, the idea of exploring language using "collective creative energies to convert textbook exercises into inductive, group-inquiry activities" is worthwhile in my opinion (Donovan 1990, 65). Such an approach to grammar might transform negative student and teacher attitudes into a refreshed appreciation for the intricacies and possibilities inherent in language. As a teacher, I see lots of potential in her proposal.

### The Grammar/Writing Connection

Much research is being done on writing, and much of the grammar research that has been done has searched for and tested any connection between writing and grammar. In Grammar and the Teaching of Writing: Limits and Possibilities, Rei Noguchi lists a sampling of this research and notes, "anti-grammar studies have, by far, outnumbered the pro-grammar ones" (Noguchi 1991, 2). Instead of focusing on specific studies, Noguchi raises two pertinent questions: "Why does formal instruction in grammar fail to produce any significant improvement in writing quality?" and "Is the whole approach [meaning all aspects of grammar instruction] irrelevant (and therefore unproductive) or just parts of it?" (Noguchi 1991, 3). Noguchi

points out that the studies that have been done fail to address these --and other-- questions.

I found Noguchi's book to be an excellent resource. His is a voice of moderation about an issue that seems to provoke emotional and sometimes extreme statements. I think his approach is different from others I have read. There are several ideas from his book which have influenced this thesis.

In reference to his first question posed, "Why does formal instruction in grammar fail to produce any significant improvement in writing quality," Noguchi suggests three "probable causes," one relating to the content to be learned, one to the learner, and the last to the study's utility (Noguchi 1991, 4).

1. "Formal grammar, being uninteresting or too difficult, is not adequately learned by students" (Noguchi 1991, 4). He explains that the "abstractness" of grammar makes it difficult for students to learn and the "impreciseness" of fitting English, a Germanic language, into categories designed for Latin, a Romance language, adds to their frustration (Noguchi, 1991, 4).

2. "Formal grammar, even if adequately learned, is not transferred to writing situations" (Noguchi 1991, 5). In this case, the failure lies not with the content but with the learner.

We cannot blame the method if it is never implemented. . . . This point becomes especially significant when we consider that most anti-grammar studies fail not only to verify if grammar was learned to a sufficient degree to apply [as opposed to verifying only if it was taught] but also, and more important, to ascertain whether the knowledge of formal grammar was applied at all in the writing process. (Noguchi 1991, 7)



3. "Formal grammar, even if adequately learned, is not transferable to writing situations" (Noguchi 1991, 8). If this last proves to be the case, no one would be to blame; the content itself would be the problem.

Next, Noguchi explores grammar and writing to see if there is any possible connection to be made. I am impressed at his willingness to reexamine an issue that most researchers seem to consider a closed case.

First, Noguchi partitions writing into three areas: content, organization, and style. Style is where he finds the most relevance for grammar instruction (Noguchi 1991). Noguchi defines style broadly. It encompasses syntax, punctuation, spelling, verb tense, fragments, run-ons, comma splices, parallelism, subordination, transition, and pronoun reference. Style can be viewed with respect to form, sentences, and the overall essay. Noguchi warns that it is a mistake for teachers to dismiss style as little more than mechanics, which is only one aspect of it. Style has to do with choice of form and of individual sentences both of which contribute to a language style. It is in examining style that specific grammatical concepts become relevant. Ideally, students can apply their knowledge of subject and verb, say, to identify sentence errors of agreement.

The word grammar, as used by Noguchi and discussed in Chapter I of this thesis, refers to traditional grammar (which he also refers to as formal grammar) as "... the direct and sustained teaching of ... categories, functions, and rules through definition, drill, and exercise" (Noguchi 1991, 2). Does grammar belong in the curriculum? Yes, it does, he writes. Grammar instruction "can play a more productive role in writing improvement - but only with certain important modifications" (Noguchi 1991, 15).

He makes a distinction between grammar as an academic subject studied by specialists and grammar as a tool for improved language use,

particularly writing. The importance of this distinction is in the different goals implied. This means that teachers must be more selective in deciding what information the student needs at a given time. How do teachers decide what material to present? Priorities must be set.

To help set these priorities, Noguchi turns to two studies of stylistic errors: the 1988 Connors-Lunsford Study and the 1981 Hairston Study. The former study identified the most common types of errors found in writing at the college level (Noguchi 1991). The latter study surveyed attitudes toward certain errors. The ranking of errors from serious to less serious was done by nonacademic professionals (Noguchi 1991). Noguchi correlated the results of both studies before proposing a "minimal set of categories to present in the classroom . . . sentence (or independent clause), subject, verb, modifier" (Noguchi 1991, 33). Modifiers include prepositional phrases, relative clauses, adjectives, adverbs, introductory elements, nominative absolutes, and participial phrases, (Noguchi 1991, 32). These categories, he cautions, are suggested only as a starting point.

Uncovering the minimal set of categories to teach, that is, the basics of basic grammar, then, requires attention to various factors, including the general utility of the category, the nature of the overlap between grammar and writing, and the relationship between the frequency and the social consequences of errors. (Noguchi 1991, 33)

In Errors and Expectations, Mina Shaughnessy lists the grammatical concepts she considers necessary in order to talk about language with students, and the concepts are, "subject, verb, direct object, indirect object, modifier, etc." (Shaughnessy 1977, 77). I would like to know exactly what the etc. stands for. The major difference between her list and Noguchi's list is

that she includes the concept of object while he includes the concept of sentence.

Shaughnessy defines grammar broadly as "any effort to focus upon the formal properties of sentences" (Shaughnessy 1977, 128) which makes grammar quite useful for looking at, discussing, or analyzing sentences. Grammar is more "a web, not a list, of explanations . . . interlocked with other grammatical concepts" (Shaughnessy 1977, 131). Any teacher who has tried to explain a seemingly minor usage error and in so doing became mired in grammatical terminology and related concepts knows exactly what Shaughnessy means.

### A Style of Inquiry

"A style of inquiry" (p. 129) is Shaughnessy's (1977) phrase for a certain view of writing errors held by Shaughnessy, and also by Patrick Hartwell and Constance Weaver. The title of an article by Weaver says it best, "Welcoming Errors as a Sign of Growth" (Weaver 1982). I think this view is very different from the view held by many classroom English language arts teachers who tend to see errors as completely negative, as a failure on the part of the student and perhaps themselves, as well.

Weaver was a professor of English at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo when she did a small study that found the proportion of sentence fragments written by students to be the same from grades four through six. Teachers in an "upper middle class suburban school collected writing samples from classes at each grade level" (Weaver 1982, 440) from first grade to sixth grade. Weaver charted fragments per 100 words. Fragments were grouped into five main categories "explanatory 'because' clauses, compound phrases,

explanatory phrases, stylistic phrases, and other subordinate clauses" (Weaver 1982, 440). A few that did not fit anywhere were considered "unclassified." The importance of the study comes in pointing out that "the types of fragments change. . . as students attempt to express new kinds of semantic relations and to employ new kinds of syntactic constructions" (Weaver 1982, 443).

For example, fragments written by first graders tend to be explanatory clauses beginning with "because." An example of this would be "Because I want to." (all examples are mine) Fragments written by third graders, on the other hand, are more often compound phrases than "because" clauses. An example of this is, "And not writing my thesis." Third graders also begin writing explanatory clause fragments that elaborate an idea: "Like missing a deadline." Now, the fragments of sixth graders fell into all of the categories, "with the most interesting spurt being in other subordinate clauses, that is, clauses other than those starting with because" (Weaver 1982, 442). An example would be, "So I can graduate." I know many teachers who express frustration that despite their best efforts, students continue to write fragments. If we teachers take the time to look more closely at the kinds of fragments being written, perhaps we will see glimmers of progress.

Patrick Hartwell suggests redefining error as a problem of metacognition and metalinguistic awareness (which he sees as crucial), instead of seeing error as the cognitive or linguistic problem of not knowing a grammatical rule. He writes, "Writers need to develop skills at two levels. One, broadly rhetorical, involves communication in meaningful contexts. The other, broadly metalinguistic rather than linguistic, involves active manipulation of language with conscious attention to surface form" (Hartwell 1985, 125). Thus, all discussion of common concepts like sentences



and subject and verb would be considered metalinguistic. Students may have intuited the content knowledge yet still may be unable to produce what the teacher wants because they may not have the vocabulary needed to express all that they understand.

Shaughnessy and Weaver give similar advice. Teachers must analyze carefully a student's errors and search for patterns or explanations. Students should be asked about their language usage and helped to identify what it is they do not understand. Students need to develop the ability to "hear" what they have written as the reader will hear it. Formulating and articulating ideas, evaluating their clarity and merit, making choices about what comes next, analyzing relationships between ideas or words, recognizing patterns, and identifying and correcting a problem are all thinking skills. By definition, language is cooperative. Language, and not just grammar, is --or should be-- a style of inquiry.

Each of these teachers/researchers sees writing, as well the errors we all make as a result of learning the craft, as a process. There is no shame involved for the writer or the teacher. In fact, an error can show knowledge of a general rule if, for example, the error involves an exception to that rule. Viewing grammar as a problem solving process invites discussion and exploration. It becomes more than a correct or incorrect fill-in-the-blank answer. Grammar is a means to the end of making meaning. By writing, discussing, reading, and listening to ourselves and others, we come to understand better the process and how to manipulate it.

### One More Argument

I immediately identified with Jean Sanborn's comment about not really learning grammar until she had to teach it. She has heard this same confession from teachers at all grade levels. Her position is that "grammar should not be a subject in the curriculum for most students until the last years of high school at the earliest" (Sanborn 1986, 73). It doesn't matter what kind of grammar you are talking about (e.g., traditional, structural, transformational, or case); grammar is still a set of abstract rules.

Sanborn's first argument against teaching grammar has to do with the child's natural ability to acquire his/her native language. She says that "syntactic maturity in performance comes with development rather than rule learning" (Sanborn 1986, 74). And, "Not only is most grammatical knowledge already acquired by the native speaker before school learning begins, but the study of grammar demands a level of abstraction most school children have not yet achieved and some never will achieve" (Sanborn 1986, 75). This is her second reason for not teaching grammar. Her third and final reason deals with egocentrism and consciousness. Children are egocentric even in language development. The study of grammar asks students "to step outside themselves and examine a process which they perform unconsciously" (Sanborn 1986, 77). Sanborn compares this self-conscious process with asking a juggler to explain in words how he/she juggles. Many cannot explain in words how to do something that to them feels natural.

Sanborn does not use the words metalinguistics and metacognition, but she introduces the issues. Sanborn seems to be suggesting that students do not have the metalinguistic ability to reflect upon their language. Many teachers and researchers would disagree with her (Smith and Tager-Flusberg



1981; Chaney 1991). But, a broader question raised by Sanborn's remarks is whether or not grammar should serve as a model for thinking about thinking. Sanborn states that, "syntactic maturity in performance comes with development rather than rule learning" (Sanborn 1986, 74). To what kind of development is she referring? Biological? Cognitive? I would factor into general cognitive development both metalinguistic and cognitive development. I am not sure what Sanborn is implying, but I think her point of view would be that grammar should not be considered a tool for thinking about thinking and maybe even thinking about language.

Sanborn believes little would be lost if grammar was never taught because the rules of grammar are already internalized. Teaching it, though, may be more than useless. She warns that the danger of forcing grammar onto developmentally unready children is that "we convince children from the moment they enter school that language is another of those mysteries 'out there'. . ." (Sanborn 1986, 78). "Grammar taught as a system of syntax . . . is not valuable for most students until their own linguistic competence has been fully exercised. School should be the place where language is used and responded to, not analyzed" (Sanborn 1986, 79).

I disagree with Sanborn's last sentence and question what she means by "linguistic competence being fully exercised." I should think analysis, in conjunction with practice using language, would enhance linguistic competence, especially for those students who need language options pointed out directly. Not all students will unconsciously appropriate a language form they have heard or seen elsewhere. I would argue that making language skills and rules explicit gives students more control over their language use. This is an argument in favor of encouraging and developing metalinguistic awareness. Students develop this control by developing mastery of their own

learning processes. This is an argument in favor of encouraging and developing metacognitive awareness.

Sanborn's set of minimum categories needed to discuss language is verb, noun, and modifier. I think this is a bit of a simplification. It might help if she indicated to what depth an understanding of these concepts should go. Does a student need to know about subject, indirect object, direct objects, object of preposition, predicate nominative, all of which are nouns or pronouns or noun phrases? Sanborn's article is discussed because she raises ideas that are worth consideration by any teacher trying to decide what he/she means by grammar, whether or not her students would benefit from studying it, and if so, what to teach as either grammar as a syntactic system (structure, in the terms of this thesis) or usage.

### General Reference

A useful paper that summarizes the grammar-in-the-curriculum issue has been written by Carl R. Shinkle for the Oregon State Department of Education, Salem. Grammar, in Shinkle's paper, includes parts of speech, diagramming, identifying types of phrases, clauses, and sentence types. It also "refers to the study of systems used to explain the workings of the language" (Shinkle 1987, 1).

In addition to summarizing research on grammar instruction, this paper discusses issues surrounding grammar instruction, such as nonstandard dialects and the need to know some rules. Implications for instruction are drawn. Essentially, Shinkle recommends that students be given the opportunity to use language extensively, discussing grammatical issues as they arise in the context of actual language use. The paper is clearly



written and well organized. The annotated bibliography is a further resource. The paper, however, does not focus on this issue in the context of middle school education.

### Summary

This chapter reviewed current literature about the teaching and learning grammar. Although few studies are being conducted currently, there are some intriguing ideas about the possibilities for integrating grammar into a broader study of language. Rei Noguchi finds a connection between grammar and writing in style. Shaughnessy advocates an inquiry approach to grammar. She, Hartwell, and Weaver remind us that growth in language (as in most things, I imagine) follows error. Jeanne Donovan suggests language study workshops. With the exception of Jean Sanborn, virtually everyone else agrees that grammar, meaning structure and including usage, does belong in the English language arts curriculum. Teachers are urged to be as creative in their approach to grammar as they have been in their approaches to other facets of the curriculum, such as reading and writing.

## CHAPTER III

### LEARNER READINESS

#### Introduction

This chapter introduces another strand into the thesis discussion, namely the age level and ability of the learner. The typical seventh grader is 12-13 years old. The age group is usually referred to as preadolescence, early adolescence, or transescence.

The aspect most obvious about seventh graders is the incredible physical differences among them. Some still resemble elementary children, while others are mature enough physically to pass for high school students. Those of us who work with seventh graders know that the emotional and intellectual differences are just as great as the more obvious physical differences.

Hershel Thornburg is the founder of the Journal of Early Adolescence. He said that this stage of growth is both transitional and formative (Thornburg 1983). In Toward Adolescence, Lipsitz wrote,

(T)here is growing consensus that the resolution of biological, cognitive, and social-emotional changes during early adolescence, changes unique in the life span in intensity, helps determine the quality of one's adult life. The years 10-14 form a critical time in human development. (Lipsitz 1980, 13)

Traditionally, middle school grades have been viewed as being somewhere between elementary and high school, and thus have been considered either upper elementary or junior high school. I think the middle grades should be considered a separate constituency worthy of study and understanding in their own right.

The New York State Education Department published, in 1984 and 1987, resource monographs on middle grade education. They are an excellent summary of information concerning this age group and the challenges of educating middle grade students. General teaching methods are recommended, also.

The longer I function as both a teacher and a student, the more convinced I have become that learner readiness is prerequisite to true learning. I see that in my own life and in the lives of my students.

The three issues I see in learner readiness for students at this age level are the same ones Lipsitz mentioned in the previous quote, although I have changed their order. The first, social-emotional development, will be discussed briefly because it is not the main focus of this thesis and is something most teachers are familiar with already. Much of this is so well established that further discussion is not warranted. The second issue is biological development. Somewhat more time will be spent on this topic. The majority of time and effort will be expended exploring the third issue, that of cognitive development. I am not suggesting that the third issue is more important or relevant than the other two. Rather, I have chosen to focus on cognitive development for two reasons. First, it is the issue over which the classroom teacher has the most control. Second, much of the work being done is new to me and I want to explore how I can use some of the ideas. All three issues are important and relevant, as will be apparent in the following discussion.

### Social-Emotional Development

For seventh graders, this is the first order of business. The New York State Education Department admitted this and then some! "Consider



academic goals as a secondary level of priority; personal-social concerns dominate thought and activities" (New York State Education Department 1987, 17). It is crucial for early adolescents to learn about themselves and how and where they fit into the world around them. It is not just that they want to socialize and interact (which, of course, they do), but that they need to. The affective aspect of education, relevant at all levels, is especially relevant at this one.

As the teacher, I can influence this issue to a certain degree through the atmosphere I create in my classroom, the activities I choose, and the ways in which I interact with students. Still, most of what needs to go on within each student and between students and peers, will go on in spite of me. I can choose to stay out of the fray as much as possible and struggle to get students to focus on their schoolwork, or I can acknowledge their need for social interaction and try to use this energy in ways that will satisfy their social agenda and the intellectual agenda I have for them. Whatever else is happening, I still have a curriculum to teach.

The Journal of Early Adolescence, published by Sage Publishing, Inc., focuses on "the physical, psychological, and social development of children 10-14 years old" (as their ad says). This journal might be a helpful resource for teachers/researchers or any other parties interested in this particular issue of learner readiness.

### Biological Development

Biological development is related to physical growth and there are two facets of physical growth that have to be considered. One, the more obvious, is the physical growth of bodies, namely the entering of puberty. In the



immediate terms of this thesis, I am less concerned with this aspect than I am with the second aspect which is brain growth and development. It is this development to which I refer in this section.

I am not sure how much control, if any, I can have over a student's biological development. Certainly I can provide challenging materials and a stimulating environment. I suspect this is an issue about which many teachers have only a superficial familiarity. I do not see much research on brain development appearing in general trade journals for teachers. The research I did find, though, gives me much to think about.

The brain grows in spurts. Perhaps unfortunately for teachers, it does not grow in a steady, continuous fashion. According to the research of Epstein, brain growth periods occur somewhere between ages 2-4, 6-8, 10-12, and 14-16 for 85-90% of all children of average and above average abilities (Epstein 1981; Toepfer 1980). I did not find data on below average students. This brain growth occurs in the elongation and branching of existing cells which creates more complex neural networks (Epstein 1981). Toepfer puts it this way, "The brain is going through a considerable extension of its circuitry and re-wiring of its associative neural networks" (Toepfer 1980, 223).

What does this mean for children experiencing a brain growth spurt? This is a difficult question to answer because direct research is lacking thus far. However, mental age growth studies of Shuttleworth (1939) have shown that a child grows an average of 40 months in mental age between the ages of 10 and 12. The average mental age growth falls to 7 months during the years 12-14, and then grows an average of 40 months between the ages of 14 and 16. This suggests that mental age, like brain development, grows in spurts, with plateau periods in between major growth spurts. Of course, we do not know from these data what is cause and what is effect: brain growth could be

triggered by new experiences or by internal maturational factors, or some combination of factors (Smith 1992, classnotes). More research in this area is needed.

In my school district where we have two middle schools, the difficulty students have during the seventh grade year is well known. Teachers see it; parents see it; and students feel it. It is as if the students hit an invisible wall when they reach seventh grade. I agree with Lowery that curriculum may be one material making up "the wall."

Schools and textbooks reflect an assumed, constant continuum of the thinking capacities of learners. . . . curriculum expectations for a student's performance are constructed upon the indices of school grade, chronological age, or achievement scores rather than upon cognitive and affective indices. (Lowery 1985, 75)

Epstein also suggests that this may explain some of the difficulties encountered in middle and junior high schools where students should be "encouraged to develop and consolidate already initiated skills" (Epstein 1981, 28) instead of pushing them up to higher cognitive levels. In my district, seventh grade is the beginning of the secondary English and mathematics curricula. There is no middle school English curriculum (at least not yet), only elementary and secondary. I do not know why the line was drawn at seventh grade. If the majority of seventh graders are indeed experiencing a brain plateau, then this probably is not the best year to start them on the secondary curriculum.

Toepfer uses a baseball analogy to contrast a brain growth period to a plateau and its application to curriculum. Somewhere during the years of 10-12 (a growth period), kids have "an expansive strike zone" (Toepfer 1980, 225) while during the years of 12-14 (a plateau), they have "a largely rigid, non-

expandable strike zone" (Toepfer 1980, 225). All teachers want to pitch his/her assignments into that strike zone so students can take a good swing and really connect with them.

The next step is an examination of cognitive development, the third issue of learner readiness. The more I know about how my students learn and understand, the closer my pitches, or assignments, are bound to be to that strike zone.

### Cognitive Development

Learning is the gaining of knowledge, skills, and understanding through interactions with our environment. Development is our growth physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively. It implies some directional pattern of change, presumably due to an interaction between maturation and learning. Cognitive development is the study of the growth of our intellectual processes and the resulting change in our capacity to learn. An important question raised in cognitive development is to what extent the direction taken reflects learning, the unfolding of a maturational plan, or an interaction of both. (Smith 1992, classnotes).

### Piagetian Theory and its Current Status.

Every reference I found acknowledges Jean Piaget's influence on the field of cognitive development. His theory of developmental stages is a central part of his contribution.

He proposed that there are four main stages of intellectual growth, whose overall thrust is toward an increasing emancipation from the here-and-now of the immediate, concrete present to a conception of the world in increasingly symbolic and abstract terms. (Gleitman 1991, 549)



The stages are sensory-motor, preoperational, concrete, and formal. They are supposed to be universal sequences across all cultures.

Following Piaget, teachers and many cognitive developmentalists assumed the direction taken in cognitive development reflected the unfolding of new maturational abilities (in interactions with our experiences). Further, like Piaget, they assumed that these are global stages of cognitive development -- emergence of new capacities with wide ranging implications across domains (Smith 1992, classnotes). While many teachers still think in terms of Piaget's developmental stages, most researchers have gone beyond Piaget. One of the reasons for this gap between classroom teacher and researcher may be that recent work in the field of cognitive developmental psychology is not published in the more general trade journals that classroom teachers are most likely to read. Some teachers may consider theories of learning too abstract and inaccessible to be useful to them. Apparently Piaget is familiar enough and/or comfortable enough to be cited most often by teachers.

Performance on certain tasks is taken as indicating the stage at which one is operating. The concrete operational and formal operational stages are the two proposed stages of Piaget most relevant to early adolescence. Concrete operations are hypothesized to be mental operations which are bound to concrete events or objects (for example, the capacity to categorize events or objects according to some dimension). However, these same operations do not hold in an abstract context because children employing concrete operational thought do not yet have the capacity to reason hypothetically. Children from the approximate ages of 7 to 11 or 12 were thought to be at the concrete operational stage (Gleitman 1991).



Beginning around the age of 12, children were thought to enter the stage of formal operations. A child who had achieved formal operational thought, according to Piaget's theory, was now capable of working with abstract ideas and considering the relationships of things dealing with the possible and the probable. The child could perform operations on a set of propositions about events, not just the events themselves. These older children could consider potential cause and effect relationships. They could work with proportion and also separate the form from the content of an argument. Each of these abilities was thought to be inaccessible to children functioning at a prior mental stage. While this theory has had enormous influence, it has not gone unchallenged (Gleitman 1991).

The issue, as I currently understand it, is not whether or not there is mental growth; everyone seems to agree on that, but whether that growth is best described in terms of Piaget's stages. The word "stage" in this context is not the generic term of the layman, who often uses it as a synonym for phase, mode, or habit. In a Piagetian context, a stage has two characteristics: consistency and discreteness. Are the stages of cognitive development actually so uniform? Many recent critics of Piaget's theory beg to differ.

For example, studies have shown that performance on various stage-indicative tasks is not very consistent. Many children can perform one task at a certain stage, yet be unable to perform another task at this same stage. Without such consistency, the explanatory value of the stage construct may be questioned (Gleitman 1991).

The question of discreteness is another reservation about Piaget's theory of stages. According to Piaget, prior to a certain age children do not have certain mental abilities (i.e. concrete or formal operations). However, critics of Piaget's theory suggest that various cognitive abilities may appear

much earlier in children than previously thought (see the section on metalinguistics in this chapter). Critics assert that a stage is not an all or nothing condition that cuts across all curricular lines. This represents a shift from thinking about cognitive development patterns as global or domain general to thinking about them as domain specific.

Although some recent work in cognitive development has questioned the utility of the concept of global stages of cognitive development, the value of analyzing the underlying structures of thought has not been questioned. It has been suggested, however, that at this point in our understanding, it may be more productive to analyze domain specific structures that affect learner readiness -- the particular set of concepts or theories students have about a particular domain (for example, their concepts of number, morality, living things, or in the case of this thesis, their concepts about language) than to look for more global structures. Further, we may need to leave aside the question of the exact causes of those changes (maturation, experience, or some interaction of the two) until we have developed a more adequate way of describing the changes themselves (Smith 1992, classnotes).

The idea that thinking skills are domain specific also refocuses curricular efforts. Some researchers recommend that research be conducted within the confines of subject matter skills since the existence of global stages may be irrelevant. That question becomes, "How do students develop particular concepts?" Conceptual thought in the discipline rather than formal thought in general should be emphasized (Nagy and Griffiths 1982). Susan Carey summarizes this view when she writes,

Piaget's stage theory has come under fire and has been abandoned by many developmental psychologists. . . . Many developmental psychologists now believe that the young child does not



think differently from the adult. . . . Phenomena that were interpreted in terms of Piaget's stage theory are better interpreted in terms of specific alternative conceptual frameworks -- novice-expert shifts and theory changes in particular domains. (Carey 1986, 1129)

### Concepts and Conceptual Change.

This thesis is looking at cognitive development as an aspect of learner readiness. From this point of view, readiness -- at least cognitive readiness -- is conceptualized as a set of concepts held or not held by a student. The concepts of concern to this thesis are about language. In particular, I am concerned with certain grammatical concepts: sentence wholeness, knowledge of sentence structure, word function, and parts of speech (noun, verb, adjective), as well as the subject/verb relationship.

A concept is a generalization about what is true of all items in a given category or class. Seiger-Ehrenberg suggests that the process for learning and teaching concepts is different from that of learning and teaching for fact, principle, attitude, and skill learning (Seiger-Ehrenberg 1985). It is the learner who must conceptualize within his/her own mind. Seiger-Ehrenberg writes,

One who has conceptualized . . . is able to consistently identify new examples [of the concept], create new examples, distinguish examples from nonexamples, . . . able to explain what he/she has done by citing the presence or absence of concept characteristics. (Seiger-Ehrenberg 1985, 164)

Naturally, I want to teach for understanding. Who does not? Teaching for understanding is more likely to result, I believe, from working with concepts, in this case grammatical concepts. Factual learning taken out of meaningful context is limited. It becomes just a piece of random information

not easily transferred. A concept goes beyond fact to ideas which exist in some context.

Here is one example of the need for conceptual understanding and learning. I can drill my students on a definition of a complete sentence until they can parrot it back to me. They, however, will continue to write in fragments, run-ons, and comma splices. The problem has to be that they do not understand the need for sentence wholeness, or they do not understand the concept of sentence wholeness itself, which is particular to writing and is built around a subject/verb relationship that in turn requires an understanding of independent and subordinate clauses.

Constance Weaver's study, discussed in the last chapter, is relevant to my example of sentence wholeness. The study "found the proportion of sentence fragments to be the same from grades 4 - 6" (Weaver 1982, 443). The types of fragments changed, though, as students attempted to express different and more complex semantic relationships. To review, Weaver's point is that the changes in types of fragments (considered errors in formal writing) are signs of growth. I would be interested in seeing the results of this study done with grades 6-8.

Perhaps middle school teachers are forcing the wrong issue. Students at this level may need more leeway to experiment as their language abilities continue to develop. Trying to stamp out sentence errors may be the wrong approach. I am not sure. But, we teachers need to look at the concepts behind the "error" and also try to understand the students' linguistic and conceptual structures. Such research efforts seem to occur mostly at the elementary level. There is also a need for research at the middle school level. Although middle school students have acquired language already, their linguistic capabilities are still evolving.



How does one teach for conceptual understanding? Modern cognitive theory views learning as building on prior conceptual understanding. Thus, in order to teach for conceptual understanding one needs to understand the set of concepts students bring to the task.

A learner's need to relate a new idea to what is already known is a theory advocated by Strike and Posner. Theirs is a "conceptual change view" of learning (Strike and Posner 1985). Strike and Posner's theory sees learning as a process of inquiry. "The task of learning is primarily one of relating what one has encountered. . . to one's current ideas" (Strike and Posner 1985, 211). Ideas are interactive and constructive, as opposed to static and additive. Ideas change as they are tested against experience. The desired concepts will not result automatically from certain activities (i.e. experiences). Personal ideas and experiences are needed in conjunction with learning activities. Thus, the important questions become, "What concepts do students hold; how are new concepts incorporated into the existing cognitive structures, and how are dysfunctional concepts either corrected or replaced?"

The conceptual change view of learning is summarized by Strike and Posner's article. "The meaning of any part is dependent on how it fits into the whole... The meaning of an idea cannot be understood apart from its conceptual home in the broader theory" (Strike and Posner 1985, 225). In some instances a "conceptual revision" (Strike and Posner 1985, 225) is required, but in other instances an outright conceptual change may be required. Strike and Posner use the terms "assimilation" and "accommodation" (Strike and Posner 1985, 225). They list four conditions necessary for conceptual change:

1. There must be dissatisfaction with existing conceptions.

2. A new conception must be minimally understood.
3. A new conception must appear initially plausible.
4. A new conception should suggest the possibility of a fruitful research program. (Strike and Posner 1985, 216)

### Concepts about Language: The Development of Metalinguistic Awareness.

I have chosen two studies to mention briefly in order to provide some background about some of the work that has been done about the development of explicit concepts about language (often called metalinguistic awareness). One study was done by Smith and Tager-Flusberg (1982), and the other was done by Chaney (1991). The earlier study is discussed first. Both concern preschool age children and help provide background on the types of metalinguistic understandings that emerge fairly early.

Smith and Tager-Flusberg. Smith and Tager-Flusberg conducted research on the metalinguistic awareness and language development of thirty-six 3- and 4-year-olds in the greater Boston area. The metalinguistic tasks they used were two speech sound judgment tasks (speech sounds and rhyme), two word judgment tasks (word concept and word-referent differentiation), and finally, two syntactic judgment tasks (morpheme and word order).

Some of these tasks may not be clear to the reader. Briefly, one speech sound task assessed the child's ability to differentiate between sounds used in speech, such as "ba" and "da," and other sounds, such as whistles and clicks. The word-referent task assessed the child's realization that a name for something is arbitrary and so unrelated to the characteristics of that thing, while the word concept task assessed the child's ability to judge whether or not something is a word in his/her language. The morpheme judgment task

assessed students' judgments of the correctness of sentences with appropriate or inappropriate word endings. And finally, the word order task assessed students' ability to make judgments about grammatical versus ungrammatical sentences based on normal or inverted word order.

The majority of 3- and 4-year-old children could make metalinguistic judgments on at least some of these tasks. In other words, these tasks demonstrated explicit concepts about language (such as word, rhyme speech sound, and grammatically correct sentences) that are held by very young children. Smith and Tager-Flusberg conclude that "preschoolers' metalinguistic capacities are more extensive than has previously been acknowledged" (Smith and Tager-Flusberg 1982, 464).

Smith and Tager-Flusberg also used two language measures -- the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Form A) and a sentence comprehension task that asked students to enact sentences to demonstrate comprehension -- to test the correlation between language tasks and metalinguistic tasks. They did find a correlation. "We found that there was a strong relationship between children's performance on [these] metalinguistic judgment tasks and two measures of their language development" (Smith and Tager-Flusberg 1982, 464).

Chaney. Chaney's findings (1991) support those of Smith and Tager-Flusberg in demonstrating that preschoolers can make metalinguistic judgments. Chaney's study investigated the relationship among selected aspects of normal language development, emerging metalinguistic skills, concepts about print, and literacy experiences.

Chaney worked with 19 middle to upper-middle class 3-year-olds in a preschool in Redwood City, CA. All children "were required to have normal



overall language development defined as a language quotient of at least 85 on the Preschool Language Scale" (Chaney 1991, 6).

Chaney identifies three domains of metalinguistic awareness: phonological awareness (speech sounds), word awareness, and structural awareness (grammaticality and "semantic well-formedness of sentences") (Chaney 1991, 3). Each of these is related to early literacy through a review of some of the literature that demonstrates that metalinguistic abilities are related closely to learning to read. She summarizes:

In brief, readers have better metalinguistic skills than nonreaders, and good readers excel over poor readers on metalinguistic tasks. Metalinguistic abilities of pre-reading children can predict later reading achievement, and training in metalinguistic skills results in improvement which holds up over time. (Chaney 1991, 4)

Chaney suggests that phonological awareness may be the most important "meta-skill" in the early stages of reading instruction (Chaney 1991, 4). She lists research that has shown that children who "possess phoneme segmentation skills" (Chaney 1991, 4) are at an advantage in learning to read over children who lack phoneme awareness (Chaney 1991, 4). Chaney also mentions previous research which found that print awareness was most strongly related to phonological awareness and that the two best predictors of a kindergartener's eventual reading success are knowledge of letters and phoneme awareness.

Word awareness and structural (syntactic) awareness have also been shown to relate to reading achievement (Chaney 1991). Chaney asserts that structural awareness may also help children use sentence context for word recognition (see also the cloze method discussion in Chapter I). And, children with structural awareness show better comprehension. Here



structure probably assists as a monitoring device for comprehension (see story grammar discussion in Chapter I).

There is much more to Chaney's study, but for the limited purposes of this thesis, her major conclusion suffices, "language development, metalinguistic awareness, and print concepts were significantly intercorrelated" (Chaney 1991, 18).

What is missing? Most research on metalinguistic awareness focuses on preschool and elementary children, particularly in reference to early reading. But, language usage is still evolving in the middle school student. What is the role of metalinguistics in this evolution? What is the role of specific language concepts in this evolution? My concern in this thesis is with a set of concepts which have not been thoroughly investigated, to my knowledge, and which may be important for later literacy tasks such as effective writing? I have many questions. Are students using their implicit knowledge of grammar to manipulate language? Do students have clear concepts of parts of speech (such as noun, verb, adjective, etc.), word function (for example, subject versus object), and the subject/verb relationship? Chapter IV investigates these questions.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE SURVEY

#### Introduction

Chapter IV reports and discusses results of my own research. The purpose of this research was to learn whether or not students had mastery of certain grammatical concepts upon entering the seventh grade. The concepts in question are those I consider important and/or troublesome for early adolescents. This knowledge would then inform my selection of materials and activities for my seventh grade students.

#### Subjects

Fifty-three sixth graders in a small, rural town in southeastern Massachusetts took the survey in March of 1992. Socio-economically, this town is lower middle to middle class. Twenty-two students were 11-years-old, thirty students were 12-years-old, and one student was 13-years-old. There were twenty-one males and thirty-two females. Fifty-one students speak English as their native language, one student was a native speaker of French, and one student was a native speaker of Portuguese. At home the dominant language used is English for fifty students, English and French for one student, and Portuguese for two students.

In this school system, students who participated were grouped and described as one top group and two general groups. The system's criteria for placement in the top group are standardized test scores, classroom performance, teacher recommendation, and parental insistence. Special education students are mainstreamed into the other two general groups.

I chose these sixth graders to survey, because they are the students I will have next year in my seventh grade classroom. I am assuming that the information I gather from the survey will give me ideas about the initial states of understanding of certain grammatical concepts held by these incoming seventh graders.

### Directions

I gave the same instructions to each group. Waiting for tardy students, settling down the students, introducing myself and my survey, and giving directions took eight minutes in each class. During the introduction, I stressed that this was a "no pressure" assignment completely unrelated to school. The task would not be graded, nor would their teacher even see the results. I emphasized that anything they wrote down would help me. I encouraged them to try to answer everything. I suggested that if they were stuck on a certain page or section, they could skip it and go onto another. Each class had between 33 and 35 minutes to work on the entire six page survey, a five page packet plus one separate page (see Appendix). The discrepancy in time was due to hall passing schedules which are done by clocks, not bell, and so are not exact.

Ten minutes before the end of each class period, I asked students still working on the five page packet to set that aside and turn their attention to the attitude survey given on a separate page. If they finished this and there was still time, they could return to the packet. If they were not able to finish everything, that was okay. Above all, I tried to put the students at ease as much as possible.

## The Survey

The survey was a packet of five stapled pages plus a sixth page which was separate from the packet. The five page packet contained various language tasks. I designed the survey to elicit knowledge of grammatical concepts I believe are important. My goal was to learn which grammatical concepts these sixth graders seem to understand and which they do not seem to understand. This information will be used to help me design learning activities that build upon the knowledge they already have and to give me insights into concepts with which they need further work.

The concepts on which I chose to focus were sentence wholeness, independent and subordinate clauses, word order, parts of speech, the subject/verb relationship in both self-generated and given sentences, and word function. The separate sixth page was an attitude survey which asked direct questions about grammar and the value of studying it. Since I work in the school system these students attend, I know that the concepts I have targeted and the word choices I have used are appropriate.

I had available an optional page of nonsense word language tasks which was a follow up to the page of nonsense word language tasks that was part of the packet. Since I was concerned with the length of the survey and the difficulty of this page, I did not include this page in the packet. However, I wanted it available for any students who finished early. The entire survey can be found in the Appendix.



## Language Tasks

### Sentence Wholeness.

The goal of this four-part sentence wholeness task series was to learn if students were able to construct, evaluate, and reconstruct, if necessary, their own sentences, and also to learn if students can identify the subject and verb relationships in their own sentences.

Spontaneous errors. The goal of this first task was to assess sentence wholeness in self-generated sentences. Students were asked to write a paragraph of about five complete sentences. Students were invited to write on any topic. In the event that any students could not think of a topic, several topic suggestions were listed on the board. To score this section, I considered the words between a capital letter and an end mark of punctuation to be a sentence. In addition to counting the number of student sentences, I also noted how many of those sentences were in fact complete sentences. Fragments were so marked as were run-on sentences. Comma splices were counted as run-on sentences.

Identification of errors. This task tested students' ability to identify sentence errors they might have made in the preceding paragraph. In order to do this, students needed to know what counted as a sentence error and be able to recognize such an error, which in turn required the ability to move from the subjective, creative process to a more objective, analytical and evaluative process.

Correction of errors. This section allowed students the opportunity to rewrite any sentence errors that they had identified. Success on this section depended upon identifying the source of the sentence error and knowing what to do to correct the sentence.

Subject/verb identification in self-generated sentences. This last section on the first page of the survey was used to test students' ability to identify the subjects and verbs in each of their own sentences. Since the subject/verb relationship is the basis of a sentence, it is my belief that an understanding of this relationship can help students recognize complete sentences and learn how sentences are constructed.

Sentence Wholeness/Clauses: Judgment and Correction.

Clauses are important because while they may or may not express a complete thought, they all contain a subject and verb relationship. I think that confusion over clauses contributes to students' sentence errors, namely fragments. This task was designed to test two skills: students' ability to recognize independent and subordinate clauses and students' ability to transform a subordinate clause into an independent clause (e.g. complete sentence).

A sentence at the top of the survey page told students that some of the word groups below could stand alone as sentences while others could not until words were either added or taken away. There were no capitalization and punctuation used in any of the four word groups, so students could not rely on these common sentence markers. Students were told that capitalization and punctuation had been omitted on purpose.

Nonsense Passage: Word Order.

This task assessed students' syntactical sense of language using nonsense words. Students were first asked to read a nonsense poem printed on the survey page. Below that, certain lines were quoted followed by questions (see Appendix). Students were to fill in the blanks using words

from the quoted poem line. The responses on this task could be analyzed in several ways. Success on this task required "sentence sense," which is an intuitive knowledge of sentences based on a feel for or understanding of sentence patterns. Sentence patterns can be deduced aurally as students reading the sentence to themselves "hear" the pattern, or visually from clues such as word endings (e.g. -s, -ed, -ly, etc.), and/or simply from language experiences (e.g. knowing articles and prepositions are likely to be followed by nouns or pronouns, for example.) I am assuming that familiarity with sentence patterns indicates an implicit understanding of syntax, or word order.

Students also would demonstrate knowledge of parts of speech, namely noun and verb, by correctly choosing a noun for the subject and object functions and a verb for the verb function in each sentence.

Finally, students would demonstrate knowledge of word function by correctly writing in the nonsense words which functioned as the subjects, verbs, and objects in these nonsense sentences. The specific language terms such as subject, verb, object, function, and syntax were not used on this page of the survey.

#### Subject/Verb Identification in Given Sentences.

This task was designed to complement the earlier section that asked students to identify the subject/verb relationship in their own sentences. Here students were asked to do the same thing with given sentences. Success on the task depended upon students' ability to differentiate between a verb and a verbal (gerund, participle, infinitive). This ability is predicated upon an understanding of the difference between a word's form and its function, or its

job in a sentence. For instance, in one of the sentences on the survey, "Swimming is lots of fun," students may think the word "swimming" is the verb since it is an action word. In this sentence, however, it is a gerund, or a noun. Students were given four sentences and asked to put a circle around the subject of each sentence and a box around its verb.

#### Categorizing by Part of Speech and Word Function.

This section required students to place nine given words into one of the following categories: almost always a noun; could be a noun, verb, or adjective; almost always a verb. Directions included three sentences defining noun, verb, and adjective. Success on this section depended upon students' flexibility with language. For each of the nine words, students had to apply an understanding of the three definitions to determine in which category it fit best. The task tested student knowledge that some words can have different functions in different contexts. Since the words were without any context, students would have to supply contexts themselves.

#### Two Sentences Demonstrating Word Function.

This task asked students to use a given word "running" as two different parts of speech in two different sentences. If the given word were a problem, students could substitute another word as long as it was used as two different parts of speech in two different sentences. In doing this task successfully, students would demonstrate an understanding of the variety of ways a gerund or participle can be used in a sentence.



### Subject and Object.

Judgment. In the first section, students were asked to read two sentences and evaluate them as meaning the same by choosing either yes or no. The sentences were, "Wilbur told Mr. Ed all of his secrets," and "Mr. Ed told Wilbur all of his secrets." A successful response would indicate student knowledge that the functions of subject and object are different and are not interchangeable without altering the meaning of the sentence.

Implicit understanding. This section simply asked students to explain in writing their answer to the last section.

Identification. This section used a series of three related sentences to probe students' understanding of the concepts of subject and object. The same two words, door and grandpa, were used in each sentence as either the subject or the object. In one sentence, both words were objects. Students had to figure out which word had which function in each sentence. To do this successfully, students would have to read each sentence carefully and evaluate the function of both words within the context of a specific sentence.

Explicit understanding. The last section called for students to demonstrate their ability to infer the grammatical definitions of subject and object and to explain in writing the difference between the two.

### Attitude Survey

This page, which was separate from the five page survey packet, asked students direct questions about grammar and the value of studying it. The objective was to learn what the students feel and think about grammar and about studying it in the middle school.

### Optional Page: Part of Speech using Nonsense Words

The nonsense poem used earlier in the survey was reprinted on this optional page. Two or three words which were the same part of speech were grouped together below the poem. Students were asked to identify the part of speech of each word group. Next, students were asked if they could find another nonsense word from the poem which could join each group as a similar part of speech. Parts of speech were listed but not defined. Success on this page required that students know the definitions of the parts of speech, first of all. Student would also have to be able to figure out the part of speech of the nonsense words using syntactical and inflection knowledge, and then find another nonsense example of that part of speech. This is a categorization skill based on word function. Since there were no semantic clues, students would have to recognize sentence pattern skills and/or rely on their intuitive "sentence sense." Those students who finished early did this page.

### Results

#### Sentence Wholeness.

Students were asked to write a paragraph of five complete sentences.

Table 1

Sentence wholeness in self-generated sentences

	<u>top group</u>	<u>general groups</u>
students writing in complete sentences	86%	52%
students writing in all simple sentences	5%	42%

Almost no one was able to identify their sentence errors. The few who did identify a sentence error actually were labeling a correct sentence as a sentence error. With the exception of one student, actual sentence errors were not identified.

Only 17% of the students revised their work. Most of those who did revise, did so needlessly since they had misidentified their sentence errors. The directions did not define sentence error except to say "don't worry about spelling."

Sentences judged and corrected. Students had to differentiate between independent and subordinate clauses. They were also asked to transform the subordinate clauses into independent clauses.

Table 2

Word groups judged and corrected

	<u>top group</u>	<u>general groups</u>
students differentiating between independent and subordinate clauses	73%	41%
students transforming clauses identified as subordinate into independent clauses	81%	71%
students lengthening the subordinate clauses	82%	89%
students shortening the subordinate clauses	18%	11%

Correlation between tasks. Sixty-eight percent of top group students demonstrated both the ability to write in complete sentences and to differentiate between independent and subordinate clauses (i.e. between



complete sentences and sentence fragments). In the general groups there was no consistency in performance on the two tasks.

#### Subject/Verb Relationship.

Self-generated sentences. This section was the hardest of all to score. First of all, I considered only independent clauses. Fragments, run-on sentences, and subordinate clauses (when thought by students to be independent clauses) were considered not applicable. Within those independent clauses, I tallied the number of subjects and verbs. If a student identified the main verb but not the helping verb, for example, or identified only half of a compound subject or verb, it was counted as half credit. Those same sentences, however, were counted as correct when I looked for subject/verb relationship; the missing part of a compound subject or verb does not mean the student does not recognize the relationship that exists between the subject and verb. It simply means that the student did not look for additional subjects or verbs. This is a very common error at the middle school level. Work partially done was considered not applicable.

The results of this section are inconclusive because so many students (30% - top group; 74% - general groups) did not do this section. I think time constraints, task difficulty, and fatigue all contributed to the poor response on this section of the survey. Basically, students are unable to identify the subject/verb relationship in their own sentences. Of those who did respond, only 40-43% correctly identified at least half of the subject/verb relationships in their own sentences. Only 50% of the students could identify at least half of their subjects and fewer than 50% could identify at least half of their verbs.

Given sentences. This section of the survey demonstrated that students cannot identify subjects and verbs in given sentences. I infer two



possible reasons: students do not understand the concept of subject and verb, and they do not understand the relationship that exists between the subject and verb. I found no consistent patterns in students' responses.

Nonsense passage. Fifty-four percent of the top group and thirty-eight percent of the general groups correctly identified the subject/verb relationships in the nonsense passage. This section of the survey suggested other ideas about the subject/verb relationship. Semantics were not a factor in these nonsense sentences. Perhaps this made it easier for students to focus on the syntax of the sentence. Also, the nonsense sentences were all short, simple (a subject - verb - object pattern making one independent clause) sentences, which I assume helped students. Although this section does not correlate with another or offer anything definite, I thought the results were interesting.

#### Word Function.

Two sentences demonstrating function. Only 40% of the top group and 26% of all the general groups could use the same -ing word as two different parts of speech in two different sentences. Nineteen percent percent did not respond.

Categorizing by part of speech and function. The majority of all students could put nouns and verbs in the appropriate categories. The percentages dropped when students had to consider three possible functions (noun, verb, and adjective).

Table 3

Categorizing by part of speech and word function

<u>Pattern</u>	<u>top group</u>	<u>general groups</u>
students correctly putting each word in the proper category	35%	8%
students putting only nouns in the 'almost always a noun' category	91%	77%
students putting only verbs in the 'almost always a verb' category	86%	81%
students correctly putting 'picture' and 'party' in the 'could be a noun, verb, or adjective category	55%	19%
missing data	9%	19%

I want to qualify the results, which I feel do not correlate with other sections with the survey. Many students omitted a word from at least one category. The words given, with the exception of 'picture' and 'party', were too easily categorized. For example, all of the nouns were common, concrete nouns.

Subject and Object.

Judgment. I am not counting this section because the wording of the statements in question, "Wilbur told Mr. Ed all of his secrets" and "Mr. Ed told Wilbur all of his secrets," turned out to be a poor choice. I wanted students to attend to the syntax of the two statements, but many attended to the their meaning instead. It is always encouraging to see students accessing prior knowledge, but in this case it interfered. When asked if the two

statements meant the same thing, many students answered "yes" and gave reasons alluding to the content of the television show on which the statements were based. These students were unable to separate the syntax of the statements from what they knew about the t.v. show.

Identification. It is clear to me that students do not understand the difference between subject and object. In this task, students were asked to identify the function of two nouns (grandpa and door) in three sentences. In the first sentence "door" was the subject; "grandpa" was the object. In the second sentence, both words were objects. In the third sentence, "grandpa" was the subject and "door" was the object. Several patterns appeared in the answers to this section. The category labeled 'other' means that I could discern no consistent pattern.

Table 4

Identifying the subject and object

<u>pattern</u>	<u>top group</u>	<u>general groups</u>
all correct	0%	0%
subj. = person (grandpa); object = thing (door)	18%	10%
1st noun = subject; 2nd noun = object	9%	10%
Subj. = main idea of sentence	41%	23%
other	14%	23%
missing data	18%	34%



Definition. The last section on this survey page asked students to explain the difference between subject and object. No one was able to do this, although one student (top group) came close. Slightly more than half of the students said that the subject was the topic of a sentence or the main idea of a sentence. This is about what I expected even though it is not quite accurate. The definition I would have loved to see would have been that the subject is the piece of the sentence about which something is being said. No one even came close to an understanding of object. I was not surprised by this. I knew it was a hard question, but I wanted to see what the students would write. When I wrote the question, I had direct objects in mind. The definition I would have liked to see would have been that the object receives the action. Quite a few students confused object with verb and adjective definitions. A few students said subject and verb were the same. There was inconsistency between many students' answers when identifying the subjects and objects in the given sentences (grandpa and door sentences) and their attempted definitions of subject and object which immediately followed.

The other part of the survey that tapped knowledge of subject and object was the nonsense passage. An interesting finding is that no students confused the subject with the object in the nonsense sentences. There was, however, confusion in all groups (45% - top group; 58% - general groups) between subject and verb and also object and verb. I think one reason maybe that the verbs in question did not end in -ed and so students could not rely on this clue. Also, all sentences were in the conventional subject - verb - object pattern. This probably made it relatively easy for students to distinguish subject from object.



### Attitude Survey.

Students were asked to define grammar. Students seemed surprised by this question. Several asked what I meant by it. They clearly were struggling to think of an answer and became visibly frustrated. Table 5 reports the major patterns found within the responses.

Table 5

What is grammar?

<u>Pattern - grammar is . . .</u>	<u>responses in all groups</u>
parts of speech	40%
words and definitions	15%
English, writing, reading, speech, communication	25%
things in English	6%
rules of English	2%
other	4%
missing data	8%

The next question asked students if grammar should be studied in the middle school. Eighty-one percent of all students said that grammar should be studied in the middle school. Seventeen percent of all students said no, it should not be studied. Their response surprised me. I think it is interesting that the majority of students believe they should study grammar even

though they are not sure what it is. I wonder if students honestly think they should study grammar, or if they are either repeating what they hear teachers and parents say or telling me what they think I want to hear. Every year students ask me why we have to study grammar, which has suggested to me that they would prefer not to study it. Perhaps we teachers need to give better reasons why the study of grammar has value. Maybe I will share the results of this survey with my students next year, or better yet have them take it and then use that as a way to open a discussion on the value of grammar.

Students then were asked to assess how much grammar should be studied. The scale went from 7 which indicated "a lot" to 1 which indicated "none." Interestingly, seven of the eight students who chose 1 (or "none") as their answer came from the same general group. Table 6 shows the pattern of responses.

Table 6

How much grammar should be studied in the middle school?

scale	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	missing data
student responses (all groups)	0%	17%	15%	32%	17%	0%	15%	4%

When asked to give reasons to support their answers to questions about whether grammar should be studied, and if so, how much of it should be studied, the greatest single response (28%) was that grammar would be needed later in life. One student replied that knowing grammar would help when learning a second language. Fifteen percent did not respond to this question.

Students were next asked at what age they thought the average child knows how to use grammar to communicate his/her needs and ideas. Students in the top group tended to indicated earlier ages, while students in the general groups tended to indicate later ages.

Table 7

How old is the average child when he/she knows how to use grammar to communicate?

<u>answer</u>	<u># of responses</u> <u>(all groups)</u>	<u>answer</u>	<u># of responses</u> <u>(all groups)</u>
4 -years-old	1	12-years-old	2
5 -years-old	2	13-years-old	7
6-years-old	3	14-years-old	9
7-years-old	2	15-years-old	2
8-years-old	7	16-years-old	1
9-years-old	4	17-years-old	1
10-years-old	4	18-years-old	2
11-years-old	3	missing data	3

Students were asked for specific suggestions teachers could use to help students better learn about language. Doing activities that are fun was suggested by 41% of the students. The next largest percentage of answers (32%) said memorizing definitions, doing exercises, and having tests would help them. Fifteen percent did not respond.



### Optional Page: Parts of Speech using Nonsense Words.

Students were able to name the part of speech of a nonsense word used in the context of a nonsense poem. In addition, students were asked to find in the poem another nonsense word to match the part of speech. Twelve students in the top group and two students in one of the general groups attempted this page. The two students from the general group got only one answer correct between them. In the top group one paper was all correct. Otherwise, each paper had at least one error, but no paper had more than two errors. Four students labeled the part of speech incorrectly, yet chose a nonsense word from the poem that matched the incorrect part of speech.

### Discussion

This survey can be thought of as both a snapshot and a blueprint. It is first a snapshot of the grammatical strengths and weaknesses of students about to enter seventh grade. Secondly, it is a blueprint which I can use to guide me as I design learning activities for my seventh graders.

### Next Time.

The survey was too long and tiring for the general groups. While ninety-five percent of the top group finished the five page language survey and one page attitude survey, only forty-eight percent of the general groups were able to do the same. Fifty-five percent of the top group had time to complete the optional page of nonsense word tasks. Only six percent of the general groups even attempted it. If I were to redo this study with new students, I would do it over two days to lessen the fatigue and overload

students demonstrated through their body language. I would also use the extra time to motivate and reassure students.

There are several survey questions that I would alter. I would take care to choose statements that are culturally unbiased. In other words, I would not base survey statements on a television show or other facets of our culture that might interfere with the purpose of the language task. The question about the "Wilbur and Mr. Ed" statements read, "Do these two sentences mean the same thing?" I also might change the question itself to something like, "Are these two sentences saying the same thing?" Perhaps this would help clarify the question for more students.

Another part of the survey that I would alter is the section that asks students to use the word "running" or another word of their own choice as two different parts of speech in two different sentences. Next time I would specify that the word used should end in -ing. On the categorizing section, I would use a more challenging list of nouns, verbs, and adjectives.

The last change I would make in the survey would be to read aloud to all students the nonsense passage. These students had never worked with nonsense words and so this task disconcerted many of them. Even students who were doing the work correctly wanted reassurances that they were following the directions as given. Based on my observations, I believe that the difficulty for some students was that they were not relying on their intuitive "sentence sense." These students did not appear to be "listening" to the sentences as they read them to themselves. Since this was not meant to be a reading assessment, I could have read the sentences to them without compromising the intended language task.

### Attitude Survey.

I found student response to this section of the survey to be the most interesting. First of all, students do not know what grammar is, which is not too surprising since many professionals have differences of opinion. An important finding of the attitude survey is that students do not realize that they already know the grammar of their native language and have known it for years! Someone needs to tell them this and remind them of the naturalness of language.

Although these students do not know for sure what grammar is, an overwhelming majority believe they should be studying it, at least in moderation. When asked why, answers were vague, but most students said they would need it later in life. Seven percent said they were too young to be studying grammar. One student said grammar study was needed in order to learn a second language.

The last question asked for suggestions that teachers could use to help students better learn about language and how it works. It did not surprise me that forty-one percent requested fun activities. What surprised me was the percentage of students (32%) who requested memorizing definitions, doing exercises, and having more tests. Upon reflection, this probably does reflect the learning style of about a third of the students, but I would not have thought the percentage would be that high. The challenge facing the teacher is to meet the needs of both the linear learner who benefits from the sequential approaches as well as the holistic learner who benefits from active, game-like approaches.



### Implications for Teaching.

Sentence wholeness. Writing a five sentence paragraph appeared to be a major undertaking for the general groups. Many spent a great deal of time deciding what to write and then getting started. This was despite the fact that I said they could write on anything and then suggested topics in case they could not think of one. I also stressed that they were "just writing the draft of a paragraph"; it was not a final copy, and spelling did not count. Clearly, their writing needs to become more fluent.

Regarding the dependency on simple sentences, I am not sure if the students favor this style or if they preferred it because it would be safer and easier. It is clear that few students can identify their own sentence errors and identify the elements of their sentences. This fact has important teaching implications. Students most likely did not know what constituted a sentence error. Perhaps they were unable to step back from the creative process to a process more evaluative, analytical, and metalinguistic. Perhaps they were not interested in evaluating their own work.

All of this suggests to me that students must be encouraged to take risks with and responsibility for their writing. My own classroom experience makes me wonder if these students were used to someone else proofreading their work and so were not used to doing it themselves.

The response in this section also reinforces the fact that students' natural use of language is far more sophisticated than their ability to dissect and analyze it. In other words, students have more language knowledge than metalinguistic knowledge. Students' tendency to lengthen rather than shorten subordinate clauses when transforming them into independent

clauses follows early writing patterns in which young children add onto sentences long before they begin deleting words from sentences (Cordeiro 1992, classnotes). Results of my survey support Tate Hudson's finding that students at this age seem unable to identify subject, verbs, and other elements of language.

Grammatical concepts. The purpose of the survey was to learn if these students understand certain grammatical concepts. The answer is that most of them do not have a clear understanding of concepts such as subject versus noun (every noun is not a subject), subject versus object, subject versus the main idea of a sentence, verb versus verbal (gerund, participle, infinitive); also, students do not understand or recognize the relationship that exists between the subject and verb of a sentence. Each of these concepts involves the idea of word function: that a word can be used in various ways depending upon its context in a sentence.

An implication for teaching has to be that these concepts need to be developed and practiced. I believe that the lack of understanding of these and other concepts indicates a rigidity in linguistic thought and performance. For example, 41% of top group students confused the subject of the sentence with the main idea of a sentence. "The door swung shut on grandpa one day, leaving a bruise on his leg." I think those students are reasoning that the sentence is about grandpa getting a bruise on his leg from the door; therefore, they reason, grandpa must be the subject of the sentence. This illustrates the point that a phrase like "subject of the sentence" may have a different meaning for the teacher than it does for the student.

Before the misunderstanding can be clarified, it has to be identified. Working from the students' own language or from a common reading excerpt, teachers and students need to compare examples of subjects of

sentences and main ideas of sentences to develop rules or standards to differentiate between them. Students then infer a general rule or definition for both concepts. From that point on, any questions regarding the concept can be measured against the definition composed by the students. This is teaching for conceptual understanding as advocated by Strike and Posner (1985), Seiger-Ehrenberg (1985), and Gardner (1991), among others.

I believe that a true understanding of sentence wholeness depends upon some understanding of the subject/verb relationship, which in turn depends upon an understanding of word function. Sentence wholeness is especially crucial to written language. A teaching goal should be for students to recognize and then build upon their implicit linguistic ability and awareness until they have conscious control of language, until they can manipulate language. Along with critical and creative thinking skills, metacognition and metalinguistics are foundations of language learning. In Chapter V, I offer some language arts lessons built on these foundations.

## CHAPTER V

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INSTRUCTION

#### Introduction

Chapter V concludes this thesis. I have defined my terms, reviewed the literature on the teaching of grammar, considered the cognitive development and learner readiness issues of early adolescence, and conducted my own research to identify grammatical concepts held -- or not held -- by some students in my school district. I chose to survey sixth graders because they will be my next seventh grade class. In this chapter, I will recommend an approach and specific lessons designed to teach grammar through sentence structure and usage. Critical and creative thinking is an inherent part of each lesson.

Does grammar, meaning sentence structure and including usage, belong in the middle school curriculum? Yes, I believe it does. As the structure of a thing, a symbol system, for example, grammar is inseparable from language. That grammar may foster metalinguistic and metacognitive development is valuable, but grammar is worthy of study mainly because it is inseparable from language. Language depends on structure to convey its message. My main recommendation is that grammar be introduced and defined as sentence structure and connected to other areas through the concept of structure. Usage is choice about the form of language one wishes to use. It is a part of the term "grammar" as that term is generally used in education. Middle school students are capable of appreciating and comprehending both sentence structure and issues of usage.



In chapter 1, I quoted Mina Shaughnessy who said, ". . . grammar is more a way of thinking, a style of inquiry, than a way of being right. . . . Grammar should be a matter not of memorizing rules or definitions but of thinking through problems as they arise" (Shaughnessy 1977, 129). Inquiry implies curiosity, discovery, and problem solving, all of which appeal to me as a teacher and learner. Instead of repeating past mistakes and thinking only in terms of grammar as usage, we need to make a place in the curriculum to open to exploration and inquiry the concept of grammar in various disciplines. I think this is where my sense of grammar as sentence structure comes in. Everything I can think of has a structure. The elements that comprise each structure, the composition of those elements, and what this means to those who use or just admire these structures are what make each structure special.

It is my opinion that too often grammar is thought of as a master list of rules and terms, of decontextualized facts. This view suggests that there are many wrong ways and one right way of using language. This primary misconception blocks the potential of grammar in conveying a message, whether through words or music or whatever. What kind of structure does the creator choose? How will the creator combine and order the specific elements? It is a process, one of inquiry, one of decision-making, one of experimentation. We need to think of grammar as a conceptual framework within which individual grammatical concepts fit.

## Critical and Creative Thinking Teaching Strategies

Early adolescents are naturally active, so learning activities which require active participation take advantage of that energy. Because early adolescents are extremely social, cooperative learning makes sense.

If Toepfer's research is valid (which is by no means certain, as far as I know), it is likely that the majority of my seventh graders may be in a brain plateau period during the year they spend with me. If this seems to be the case with my students, I may want to concentrate more on reviewing and consolidating the previous learning. Certain concepts would be selected and students would be given many opportunities to achieve different levels of mastery as they repeatedly encounter those same concepts from various distances and perspectives. The concepts I would choose are those upon which I based my survey: sentence wholeness, word function, word order, parts of speech, and the subject/verb relationship. I know these concepts are appropriate for this age level in my school district.

Once I have the targeted concepts in mind, I refer to my critical and creative thinking framework for methodology. The strategies listed on page 85 encourage thinking skills and dispositions. All of them may not be used in each lesson, but in every lesson some of them apply. In each lesson, I try to accommodate different learning styles through a variety of activities which all require that each student be actively involved in his/her own learning.

These lists are not comprehensive; rather, these are the strategies that are relevant to the lessons I propose. Evaluation, reflection, metacognition, and metalinguistics appear on the first two lists because they are all a part of both convergent and divergent thinking.

The first cluster of strategies promotes convergent thinking.

- |                        |                               |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. analysis            | 5. deductive reasoning        |
| 2. pattern recognition | 6. inference                  |
| 3. categorizing        | 7. evaluation and reflection  |
| 4. inductive reasoning | 8. metacognitive questioning  |
|                        | 9. metalinguistic questioning |

The next cluster of thinking strategies promotes divergent thinking.

- |                                   |                               |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. open-ended tasks and questions | 5. synthesis                  |
| 2. problem identification         | 6. evaluation and reflection  |
| 3. problem solving                | 7. metacognitive questioning  |
| 4. analogy and metaphor           | 8. metalinguistic questioning |

The final cluster of strategies promotes the role of the affective in thinking and learning.

1. encouragement of risk-taking
2. decision-making
3. having confidence in one's own ideas
4. learning to persevere
5. learning to deal with frustration
6. development of intrinsic motivation
7. a willingness to become involved in one's learning
8. use of cognitive organizers (i.e. concept maps)

### Building Language Competence

The goals of this lesson series are primarily to help students develop a concept of sentence structure, and then to use sentence structure to learn specific grammatical concepts. These lessons are offered as a template. Teachers are encouraged to adapt the lessons to teach any language concepts. All lessons are designed by theme. They are not designed necessarily to fit within a forty minute class.

#### Lesson 1: Development of the Concept of Structure.

Targeted concept. Individual elements combine to form a structure.

Objectives. The objectives of this activity are to introduce the concept of structure and the word "structure" and to elaborate on the concept by



allowing students the opportunity to see that different structures can be constructed from the exact same elements. Students will note the different things that have a structure.

**Materials.** A bag full of natural wood building blocks is needed for each group of students. Each bag must contain the same number of blocks, as well as the same number of different shaped blocks.

**Methods.** Students should be grouped in three's or four's. Each group receives an identical bag of blocks with which "to play." After the groups have been engaged for awhile with forming different configurations with the blocks, the teacher asks each group to build a structure. When everyone is done, the entire class walks around to see what other groups have built. After students are back in their own groups, the teacher asks students to compare and contrast the structures and to give reasons why each was sound. What makes the structures different or similar? (All discussion is noted on the board or on an overhead projector so students see as well as hear the discussion.) After recording the responses, the teacher summarizes the activity and asks students to broaden the concept.

Using the word "structure" as the central concept, the teacher then asks students what other things have a structure. A concept map is drawn with students' responses which could include anything: a building, a piece of art, music, language, a daily schedule or routine task, our lives, our bodies, and so on. Then blank concepts maps are passed out to the class. Choosing one example of structure, the entire class identifies and maps the elements that comprise that structure. In a paragraph, everyone describes the structure.

Another concept map is distributed to each student. Working in their groups, students choose an example of structure, draw a concept map, then



describe it in a paragraph. Students share maps. At this point, the class infers a definition of structure.

Lesson wrap-up. The teacher directs student learning by reviewing the lesson with students. What is structure? What are some things that have a structure? Is there anything that does not have a structure? To reinforce the lesson, the teacher might give a homework assignment asking students to identify an example of structure in their personal lives, make a concept map, and describe it in a paragraph. The purpose of the wrap-up is to synthesize the lesson.

## Lesson 2: Grammar Means Sentence Structure.

Targeted concepts. Word order is one aspect of sentence structure in the English language. Word order influences meaning in our language. Students have an intuitive knowledge of the grammar of their native language that can be used and developed through metalinguistic awareness. Metacognitive awareness also influences learning.

Objectives. The objective of this activity is to apply the concept of structure to the English language. Students will unscramble word block sentences, note the strategies used to do so, reflect upon the elements that comprise language, and then recognize the intuitive knowledge of grammar they possess as native speakers. The terms "grammar," "metalinguistics," and "metacognition" are introduced.

Materials. The materials are blocks, each with a word attached (taped paper or a post-it note). The words all form a sentence; for example, "The cat chased the mouse," or "Eleanor kicked the soccer ball to Henry."

Methods. The teacher reviews the previous lesson. Students are grouped in three's or four's. A recorder is designated in each group to write

down important discussion, decisions, and questions. Each group receives a box or bag containing blocks. Each block has a word attached. A few bags of blocks should contain different words so groups can switch bags.

Students are asked to unscramble the sentence. Blocks can be arranged any way (left to right, top to bottom, bottom to top) as long as the sentence makes sense and reads easily. Using notes taken by the recorders, the teacher and students discuss, analyze, evaluate the activity and their responses to it. How does language have a structure? What elements comprise that structure? How did you know where to put each word in the sentence? How does word order affect the meaning of the sentence? What strategies did different groups use to unscramble the sentence? Were any strategies more or less effective? (Again, all discussion is written on the board or on an overhead projector so students see and hear the discussion.) The words "grammar," "metalinguistics," and "metacognition" can be introduced.

Now, groups switch blocks. A new recorder takes over as students repeat the activity. The teacher may also choose to pass out all new blocks that form more challenging sentences. The purpose of redoing the activity is to reinforce the lesson.

Lesson wrap-up. The class reviews the meaning of structure and reinforces the new vocabulary terms: grammar, metalinguistics, metacognition. Using their homework from the previous lesson, the students review structure and summarize its application to language. The teacher stresses their intuitive knowledge of language.

### Lesson 3: Categorizing Words in Context by Part of Speech and Word Function.

Targeted concepts. Parts of speech, word function, word order, and metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness.

Objectives. One objective of this activity is to unscramble a sentence using blocks with words attached. Another objective is to categorize words in context by part of speech and/or word function by putting each part of speech on the same shaped block. Students will also identify and evaluate strategies they use to complete this activity. Students will recognize the role of word function in a sentence.

Materials. The materials are the blocks, each with a word written on a post-it note and attached to each block. The words might form a sentence like, "Kora always loses her English homework." Each part of speech should be attached to the same shaped block. For instance, nouns are attached to large rectangles because nouns are central to the sentence and a large, substantial shape would convey this. Verbs might be attached to a triangle or to an arch-shaped block because the piece can be rocked, thus conveying an action word. (I would stick with action verbs for this lesson. Linking verbs can be worked in later.) Extra sentences are prepared on post-it notes for students to attach to blocks and construct a sentence.

Methods. Each group of three or four students receives a bag of blocks with words attached. Someone in the group functions as a recorder. The first direction is to unscramble the sentence. Students raise their hands when they are done. The teacher records the time it took each group to complete the task. Then, the teacher asks the group recorders to share with everyone the steps their group took to unscramble the sentence.



Students compare, contrast, and evaluate the methods. Did some groups think to sort the blocks in any fashion? How? The teacher tells how long it took to unscramble the sentences using methods by different groups. What strategies save time? What strategies seem to waste time? What strategies might you use if doing the task again? In what other contexts can you use this pattern of action and evaluation?

At this point, the teacher asks students to examine the words and the kind of blocks to which they are attached. Is there any rhyme or reason for certain words being attached to certain blocks? The teacher would direct the discussion to the fact that different parts of speech were attached to different shaped blocks, with a particular part of speech sharing that same shape. The parts of speech and their definitions might be reviewed here. To reinforce the lesson, the teacher would pass out another scrambled sentence written on post-it notes and ask students to attach each word to a certain shaped block and then unscramble the sentence.

Lesson wrap-up. The teacher reviews the parts of speech and demonstrates the connection to word function in sentences. The idea that language has structure and that grammar means sentence structure is reviewed and reinforced. Again, students' implicit knowledge is made explicit.

#### Lesson 4: Sorting Phrases and Clauses.

Targeted concepts. Identification of noun, verb, and prepositional phrases, as well as independent and subordinate clauses; recognition of students' metalinguistic sense of language.

Objectives. By grouping words in ways that make sense to them, students will infer definitions of noun phrase, verb phrase, and prepositional



phrase, and independent clause, subordinate clause. Another objective of this activity is to review the concepts of word order, word function, and parts of speech.

Materials. Blocks with words attached by part of speech and shape, also long flat blocks or oak tag strips of paper to be used as mountings for word groups. Here are three sample word groups: Polly saw Rich; that boy in the red shirt; under the rug, the fat cat; ate the spaghetti.

Methods. Students are again in small groups and a new recorder is chosen. Groups receive their blocks and are warned that they are not just unscrambling a sentence. Instead, they are to group together those words that seem to belong together. Each word group should be constructed on a separate mounting or base to designate it visually as a separate word group. This time, groups are given written questions to guide their thinking: What words seem to go together? Give reasons for your grouping decisions. What are some similarities and differences among the word groups? (Hint: Look for part of speech patterns.)

After the groups have completed the activity, they share their responses to the written questions. Responses are analyzed and evaluated. The teacher leads the discussion toward defining first phrases and then clauses. Using more examples, students begin to define independent and subordinate clauses and prepositional phrase (the teacher will have to provide the terminology) by setting criteria for each. Students will begin to recognize patterns such as prepositional phrases beginning with a preposition and ending with a noun or pronoun, clauses having a subject/verb relationship and having a main meaning-bearing function in a sentence, independent clauses being a complete sentence, and subordinate clauses

beginning with a conjunction or a relative pronoun. As always metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness is stressed.

Lesson wrap-up. Building an understanding of phrases and clauses takes lots of time and practice. This lesson simply begins the process by beginning with students' sense of which words go together. To reinforce the lesson, students might suggest clauses and phrases that the class can measure against their own definitions and criteria. The teacher would summarize the lesson and review the steps taken and words learned.

#### Lesson 5: Generating Original Sentences to Review Parts of Speech, Word Function, Clauses, and Phrases.

Targeted concepts. Sentence wholeness, categorizing words by part of speech and/or word function, recognizing clauses and phrases.

Objectives. The objective of this activity is to synthesize prior lessons. Students will create their own complete sentences. They will then attach those words to certain shaped blocks by their part of speech or function. This is a categorizing skill. Students will demonstrate their ability to recognize phrases and clauses by assembling those word groups on separate mountings that can be moved into the larger sentence. In doing all of the above, students will rely on their intuitive sense of language, their metalinguistic ability to reflect upon their language use, and an assortment of metacognitive strategies to complete the task correctly.

Materials. Blocks, mountings, blank post-it notes

Methods. A recorder is chosen. Each group is given a bag of materials. Their instructions are to make up their own sentences, attach words to blocks as done earlier, and assemble any clauses and phrases on separate mountings within the entire sentence. Students have half a period to create. It is

important to leave time to evaluate the sentence structures of other groups and to compare, contrast, and fully discuss the processes and results. This activity is done best within a single class period. The teacher may choose to assign certain language tasks (i.e. generating the sentence, attaching words to blocks, grouping word groups on mountings, etc.) to individual group members.

Lesson wrap-up. Students and teacher will reflect upon the series of lessons. What has been learned? Terms such as "metalinguistics," "metacognition," "structure," "grammar," plus specific language terms are reviewed. To complete the series, students might be asked to look again at the concept maps about structure that they completed in the first lesson.

### Summary of Lesson Series on Structure

The lessons just presented are only examples of a few of the ways in which building blocks can be used to work with structure. I think this is an approach with lots of potential. It is a visual, tactile, concrete way to manipulate language. In the process, students work together cooperatively and also develop and practice critical and creative thinking skills. Hopefully, working with a medium as engaging as building blocks makes grammar seem more engaging and fun. Since grammar is defined as meaning sentence structure but also including usage, the last part of this final chapter makes recommendations about teaching grammar through usage.

### Understanding Usage

#### Gallo's Spectrum.

Although I have included usage in the definition of grammar, usage and structure are not the same. For one thing, structure is more static, while



usage is dynamic. The following spectrum of language was developed by Dr. Delores Gallo. She developed it as a non-hierarchical way to discuss the concept of appropriate language use with multi-dialectical inner city students. Appropriate language is that which is matched with its context and purpose (Gallo 1992, classnotes). Gallo asserts,

Two factors taken together - rate of change and breadth of communication - account for an utterance's placement on the continuum. For example, slang changes rapidly and communicates narrowly in time and space; formal written language changes slowly and communicates broadly. Each is 'best' when matched with its place and purpose. (Gallo 1992, classnotes)

This is Gallo's spectrum.

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slang	colloquial (regional)	informal spoken	informal written	formal spoken	formal written
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Slang and formal written language are on opposite ends of the spectrum. Slang is exclusive. Its vocabulary is closely identified with various sub groups. Jargon would be a form of slang. Its purpose is to denote membership within a certain group or sub group. Slang is limited as a method of communication because its audience is narrow. Since slang changes rapidly, it helps keep the language fresh and growing.

Formal written language, on the opposite end, changes slowly and consequently can reach the widest audience. From slang to formal written English and everything in between, all forms of the language are valuable. Standard English is not the only valid form of the language. I think this is something teachers tend to forget because usage in the curriculum usually means teaching Standard English. There are valid reasons for teaching

Standard English. It is, after all, the form of language used in public and professional discourse. But, middle school students are certainly old enough to appreciate and recognize the validity of all forms of the language. Perhaps one way help students learn Standard English, is to give them opportunities to learn what it is not.

I think this is a sensible, realistic approach to the issue of usage. My goal in using this spectrum concept is to foster student recognition of the many appropriate forms of the language. Usage operates on a continuum. Usage is situation specific. The issue is not "good versus bad English," but appropriate versus inappropriate language. The variety along the continuum gives language its richness, its beauty, its adaptability, its power.

The value of the spectrum is to encourage students to evaluate language use as either appropriate or inappropriate as opposed to good or bad. Students can become more comfortable with this idea by generating examples of each category and explaining how each one might be "best" in some context. The same message will then be stated across the spectrum. Students will be creating the message then altering it to fit each spectrum category. In working with Gallo's spectrum, students are manipulating language, thus increasing their flexibility with language. This awareness of linguistic possibilities is further developed in the following lesson series.

#### Contemporary Usage: Two Cases.

Jesse Jackson. In February of this year, The New Yorker did a three part profile of Jesse Jackson. I think Jackson is a wonderful example of the power and richness of colloquial language because he has retained many patterns of Black English Vernacular (BEV), which Marshall Frady, author of the series on Jackson notes, "The very inflection of his voice discomforts



some sensibilities; for whatever reason, Jackson has not undertaken to 'whiten' his enunciation" (Frady 1992, 38). Whatever your impressions of the man, it would be hard to dispute the power of his oratory. I can think of few other current public figures (Mario Cuomo comes to mind) who use language as colorfully, distinctly, and effectively as Jesse Jackson. For these reasons, the man and his words are worth examining.

Speechwriter Peggy Noonan. Another less current figure who was known for his communication skills is Ronald Reagan. One of the speech writers responsible for this was Peggy Noonan. In What I Saw At the Revolution (1990), Noonan tells about speech writing for Ronald Reagan and occasionally for George Bush.

Noonan writes, "In time I knew I was looking for the grammar of the presidency, the sound and tone and tense of it" (Noonan 1990, 52). Noonan's own writing provides a fine example of the difference between informal and formal written language. I found the prose of her book surprisingly inelegant and the ideas disjointed, yet her speech excerpts are quite elegant and beautifully crafted.

In preparation for writing a speech, Noonan read biographies and poetry. Regarding Ezra Pound's *Cantos* Noonan admits, ". . . I don't think I ever understood a one. It didn't matter, the anarchy of the language and the sweeping away of syntax had force" (Noonan 1990, 73). Noonan contrasts the "high rhetoric" she provided Reagan with the "low-key, direct" words she provided Bush (Noonan, 1990, 297, 336). This is a perfect example of real-life usage decision-making. Throughout the book Noonan describes her writing habits and problems: the procrastination, the blocks, the many drafts.

These selections about Jackson and Noonan are examples of a whole language approach. All lessons derive from language used in a context. In



the next section, I suggest a series of lessons about usage using the language of Jesse Jackson and Peggy Noonan. Critical and creative thinking as well as specific language goals are infused in the overall text of the lessons.

#### Lesson 1: Jesse Jackson, Part 1.

Targeted concepts. Issues of usage, such as audience, context, speakers' purpose, word choice, and tone; metalinguistic awareness.

Objectives. Students will learn who Jesse Jackson is, and note his use of the language and ways in which it differs from their own. In so doing, students will experience a form of English called Black English Vernacular (BEV) in a setting that respects and admires this form of the English language. Finally, students will write a statement suitable for Jackson's style.

Materials. With enough planning, the teacher could probably catch Jackson on television and video tape him. If this is not possible, the teacher needs to find excerpts of his speeches. The New Yorker (February 3, 10 and 17 of 1992), which did a three part series on Jackson, is a good resource for information about Jackson and examples of his speech.

Methods. The teacher begins the class by asking what students know about Jesse Jackson. Any information is written on the board. (If the students have little or no information, that is fine for now.) It is best if the teacher has Jackson on tape and plays it for the class. If this is impossible, the teacher could read aloud Jackson's excerpts. It is important for the teacher to bring alive Jackson's language since his linguistic strength is aural.

Based on what students hear, what can they infer about Jackson, his audience, the setting or context of the language use? What are their initial impressions of Jackson? The teacher records any impressions on the board. At this time, the teacher fills in any missing, basic information about Jackson

that did not come out earlier. Students and teacher examine any underlying assumptions students seem to make about Jackson based on his words.

After this introductory activity, students are in groups of three or four. Each group receives a different Jackson excerpt. A recorder is chosen to record the group's work. It would be helpful for students to read aloud Jackson's language themselves. The attendant danger is that students will make fun of unfamiliar speech patterns. The teacher must exercise judgment here. If the teacher feels confident that it will work, students practice reading aloud the excerpts in their groups so that they get a feel for the cadences and rhythm of Jackson's language. What stylistic devices, such as alliteration, imagery, analogy, etc, does Jackson employ?

Students then examine the excerpts with the following questions in mind: 1) Who is his audience? 2) What might the context be of the excerpt? 3) Find specific examples of Jackson's linguistic style. 4) In what ways does Jackson's use of language differ from your own? Next, students paraphrase Jackson's message. Are their words as effective in conveying his message to this group? And finally, students will write a statement and then render it as Jackson might.

## Lesson 2: Jesse Jackson, Part 2.

Targeted concepts. Judging the effectiveness of language.

Objectives. Students will recognize a few specific differences between their language and Jackson's use of BEV. Students will set criteria by which to evaluate the effectiveness of Jackson's language considering factors like

audience, tone, word choice, as well as the speaker's purpose. Students will identify differences between oral and written language.

Materials. The same

Methods. The teacher briefly reviews with students the work done the day before. Each group briefly shares with the class their Jackson excerpt along with their observations and questions about it. The teacher records major points on the board or on an overhead projector. Examples of BEV are noted. Does it matter whether the excerpts are read or heard aloud? The major question before the class is, "How are each of these examples of effective or ineffective language use?" In order to address this question, students and teacher have to decide which factors to consider, like audience, text, specific word choices, and so on, and then decide how to measure effectiveness. Students and teacher devise criteria of effective language use against which they measure Jackson's words. The teacher asks students about their impressions of Jackson at this point. How have they changed? Why or why not? Reasons are given for all answers.

Lessons 1 and 2 wrap up. Students will share what they have learned about Jesse Jackson and his examples of BEV. The goal is for students to hear forms of English other than Standard English with open minds and ears. Teacher and students review their process of establishing criteria for judging effective language use and determine the value of the process.

### Lesson 3: Speech Writing.

Targeted concepts. Language is personal and so there are many styles of language. A speechwriter tailors the speech to the speaker and to the occasion. Metalinguistic awareness is stressed.



Objectives. Students will learn what it is like to be a speech writer. They will learn about Peggy Noonan and compare formal with informal language. Students will act as speech writers for one another.

Materials. Copies of excerpts from What I Saw at the Revolution (1990) by Peggy Noonan are the only materials needed.

Methods. The teacher introduces Peggy Noonan as a former speech writer for President Reagan and then briefly for President Bush. First the teacher elicits prior knowledge about Reagan and Bush in general and about their linguistic reputations. Then, the focus turns to speech writing. What does a speech writer need to consider when writing speeches? What might be hard or easy about the job? The teacher records any information on the board.

Students are now in groups of three or four. Each group receives the same excerpts from Noonan's book and questions. 1) What does Noonan mean when she talks about the grammar of the Reagan presidency? 2) Given several phrases from speeches written for Reagan and Bush, how does her writing for one differ from her writing for the other? 3) Where does she get her ideas, her inspiration? 4) What details can you find about her work habits and problems she encounters while writing? A different student acts as recorder for each group. Answers are shared with and discussed by the class.

Finally, groups compare Noonan's prose with her speeches. This is a good example of the difference between formal and informal language. Students read aloud excerpts to get a better feel for the varieties of Noonan's language. Again, the entire class participates in all discussions.

#### Lesson 4: Speech Writing for Real.

Targeted concepts. Problem-solving issues of usage, sentence structure, and metalinguistic awareness when writing a speech for another.

Objectives. Students will act as speech writers for another student. Students and teacher will determine criteria and strategies for effective speech writing and speech giving. Speeches will be videotaped. Roles will be rotated so each student writes a speech for another student and each students gives a speech that was written expressly for him/her.

Materials. The teacher prepares roles for students to assume for this speech writing activity. If students think of their own roles, that is fine, too. This lesson will likely take one week.

Methods. First the class will brainstorm possible interview questions. The activity begins with students interviewing each other about topics of concern to them and about possible sources for quotes. Students are either in groups of two or three. The teacher may allow speech writers to work with a partner, or the teacher may wish to use a recorder to document the process. After roles are decided upon, the class brainstorms strategies for getting started. Students begin to work. About ten or fifteen minutes before the class ends, everyone reports his/her progress and any problems encountered. This is an opportunity for class problem-solving and should be scheduled daily or every other day. Students determine what they need to succeed, for example, excerpts of other speeches, or a book of quotations, or some reference materials, and then students and teacher find those materials and learn how to use them.

Once the actual writing is underway, students can consult with one another and with the teacher to work on the writing, revising, and editing. The teacher identifies common writing problems and offers mini-lessons to

the whole class or small groups as needed. This is where concepts like subject/verb relationship, word function, clauses, parts of speech, sentence combining, punctuation can be reviewed and taught using the general strategies named earlier.

Students watch selected television excerpts to identify characteristics of effective ideas about public speaking. Then, they practice before the class and on video before performing “officially” on video. The class constantly measures the written and oral speeches against criteria they set.

Lessons 3 and 4 wrap-up. To reinforce this experience, the teacher should simply open the discussion by asking students what they learned about language. What did they enjoy most and least? Reasons and examples should accompany all discussion.

### Summary of Lesson Series on Usage

This lesson is multi-faceted. Students are reading, writing and speaking every day in a purposely self-conscious manner. They have a good deal of control over their work, for example, class problem-solving sessions, peer collaboration, teacher input, resources made available upon their request, and plenty of trial runs on and off camera. Each of these is supposed to make each student feel challenged, supported, and responsible for the quality of his/her work.

The teacher can meet curricular demands through student generated language instead of meaningless textbook exercises in which students have no investment. There are lots of other lesson possibilities. Students could collect examples of ineffective language use; for example spontaneous utterances by George Bush or Dan Quayle or anyone else, for that matter.



Students could then try to figure out what the speaker was trying to say and rewrite the remark to express the idea clearly. Students could watch parts of the presidential debates and rate the performer and the message. The teacher could find audiotapes, for example, books on tape or literary readings, that illustrate a regional accent. Students could then try to write for that accent. The class could begin a list of unusual words or word phrases. Students could identify common language problems and create games that reinforce the most effective language use. Students could design language computer games or exercises if the school has the technology and the expertise. Students could make parts of speech catalogs or dictionaries for younger students.

These ideas all make use of some critical and creative thinking strategies. As the teacher, I am always on the lookout for opportunities to address my own agenda of language concepts and the curricular agenda. These lesson ideas also are suited to the early adolescent. The affective element of learning is paramount. Students have opportunities to socialize and collaborate. Students are allowed to move about physically. Every attempt is made to harness their energy and passion. And finally, every student is given multiple opportunities to master the targeted concepts and demonstrate that mastery. Grammar, meaning structure and including usage, is learned as something desirable and necessary.

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## APPENDIX

### SURVEY

- I. A. Write a draft of a short paragraph of 5 complete sentences.  
Please do not make any corrections at this point in the survey.  
You may write on any topic. If you need suggested topics,  
there are several listed on the board.

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- B. Reread your paragraph. Using the colored pen provided,  
draw a **wavy line** under any sentence errors that you find.  
(Don't worry about spelling errors) Then number each  
**wavy line** so it looks something like this: 

- C. On the numbered lines below, rewrite any sentence error you  
identified so that the sentence is correct.

1. 

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2. 

---
3. 

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4. 

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5. 

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- D. Since I originally asked for 5 sentences, I'd like you to go back  
and in each sentence put a **circle** around each **subject** and a  
**box** around its **verb**. It doesn't matter if you do this in  
sections **A** or **C**.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION...

Some of the groups of words below can stand alone as a sentence. Some cannot stand alone as a sentence until a word is taken out or words are added.

[Note: Capitalization and punctuation were omitted (left out) on purpose. Don't worry about that.]

II. A. DIRECTIONS: FIRST, circle the number beside each word group that is a complete sentence, meaning it expresses a complete thought. (Remember, capitalization and punctuation don't count.)

1. ice cream is delicious

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2. because Clarence lied

---

3. something fell behind the computer

---

4. that the water was cold

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B. SECOND, change any remaining word groups so that each will be a complete sentence. You may make any changes you want. Please rewrite these corrected sentences on the lines provided above.

### III. READ THE POEM BELOW.

THE VAPY KOOBS (edited from page 164 in  
Ideas for Teaching English in the Junior High and Middle School,  
published by the NCTE)

The vapy koobs desaked the citar molently.  
The franching tigs spang grushly from the soog.  
The lipendoofs canished the tasar solently,  
while dospy gubs ferlumped the sinting noog.  
The ampting haig baks ummer from the pum.  
The hippendome nigs bommer and derveling,  
while hashims prag in limper and in lum.

**DIRECTIONS:** For each line of the poem quoted below,  
answer the following questions.

"The vapy koobs desaked the citar molently."

1. The \_\_\_\_\_ (did what?) \_\_\_\_\_ (to what or whom?)

\_\_\_\_\_.

---

"The lipendoofs canished the tasar solently,"

2. The \_\_\_\_\_ (did what?) \_\_\_\_\_ (to what or whom?)

\_\_\_\_\_.

---

"The hippendome nigs bommer and derveling,"

3. The \_\_\_\_\_ (does what?) \_\_\_\_\_ (to what or whom?)

\_\_\_\_\_.

---

"while hashims prag in limper and in lum."

4. The \_\_\_\_\_ (do what?) \_\_\_\_\_.



IV. A. DIRECTIONS: Identify each subject and its verb by putting a circle around each subject and a box around its verb.

1. Swimming is lots of fun.
2. While waiting for the movie to begin, I ate all my Milk Duds and half of my popcorn.
3. After the last game, they destroyed the broken equipment.
4. Kora likes to draw pictures of her horse.

B. DIRECTIONS: Put each word into the category where it belongs. A word can be put into only one category. [A noun is a person, place, thing, or idea. An adjective is a word that describes a noun or pronoun. An verb is a word that shows action or a state of being.]

briefcase	did	lamp	library	
party	picture	read	sheet	write

almost always noun

could be a noun,  
verb, or adjective

almost always a verb

---

C. DIRECTIONS: Write 2 sentences using the word running as a different part of speech in each sentence. You may choose a different word to use if you'd rather, as long as it's used in two different sentences as two different parts of speech.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_

V. A. Do the following two sentences mean the same thing? Circle the best answer: YES NO

1. Wilbur told Mr. Ed all of his secrets.
2. Mr. Ed told Wilbur all of his secrets.

B. Explain your answer.

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C. Read the following sentences and write either **subject** OR **object** in the blanks below.

1. The door swung shut on grandpa one day, leaving a bruise on his leg.

door is the \_\_\_\_\_

grandpa is the \_\_\_\_\_

2. Since that sad day, I always hold the door for grandpa.

door is the \_\_\_\_\_

grandpa is the \_\_\_\_\_

3. Even so, grandpa now hurries through that door.

grandpa is the \_\_\_\_\_

door is the \_\_\_\_\_

D. Explain the difference between subject and object.

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## ATTITUDE SURVEY

1. What is grammar? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. Should middle school students study grammar? YES NO  
(CIRCLE EITHER YES OR NO)

3. How much grammar should be taught? (CIRCLE A NUMBER ON  
THE SCALE FROM 7 TO 1. 7 = A LOT; 1 = NONE)

A LOT		SOME		NONE
7	6	5	4	3 2 1

4. Give some reasons for your answers to the last two questions.

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5. How old would you say the average person is when he/she knows how to  
use grammar to communicate his/her needs and ideas? \_\_\_\_ years.

6. What are some things that a teacher could do that would help **you** learn  
more about language and how it works? Try to give me some specific ideas  
and examples so I know what you mean.

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OPTIONAL PAGE

Here's the same poem again.

THE VAPY KOOBS

- a. The vapy koobs desaked the citar molently.
- b. The franching tigs spang grushly from the soog.
- c. The lipendoofs canished the tasar solently,
- d. while dospy gubs ferlumped the sinting noog.
- e. The ampting haig baks ummer from the pum.
- f. The hippendome nigs bommer and derveling,
- g. while hashims prag in limper and in lum.

**DIRECTIONS:** The words used below are laken from the above poem. What part of speech is each word group (parts of speech: noun, pronoun, verb, adverb, adjective, preposition, conjunction)? Write your answer on the line provided. Then find another word from the poem that is the same part of speech as the examples used and write it on the second line provided.

1. *vapy, dospy, sinting* (The three words are found in lines a, d, and d in the above poem.) These three words are all what part of speech? \_\_\_\_\_  
What is another word from the poem that is also this same part of speech? \_\_\_\_\_
2. *molently, solently* (The two words are found in lines a and c.) These words are both what part of speech? \_\_\_\_\_ What is another word from the poem that is also this same part of speech? \_\_\_\_\_
3. *limper, lum, noog* (The three words are found in lines g, g, and d.) These three words are all what part of speech? \_\_\_\_\_ What is another word from the poem that is also this same part of speech? \_\_\_\_\_
4. *spang, ferlumped* (The two words are found in lines b and d.) These two words are both what part of speech? \_\_\_\_\_ What is another word from the poem that is also this same part of speech? \_\_\_\_\_